



**WESTERN  
GOVERNORS'**  
ASSOCIATION

# 2020 ANNUAL REPORT



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# Dear Friends and Colleagues,

There is no such thing as a “typical” day for a Governor. And most Governors would agree that recent months have been extraordinarily atypical.

Governors have been on the front lines of the battle against the coronavirus pandemic. Whether making difficult decisions about testing, quarantine, or suspension – and reopening – of commercial activities, Governors have been resolute in providing the best for their citizens.

The impressive effort by Governors has been a national phenomenon, but Western Governors have led the way in protecting both the lives and livelihoods of their citizens while maintaining critical services in urban and rural communities. Last July we launched the *Reimagining the Rural West Initiative*, which fortuitously sought to address many of the challenges western states face during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chair’s Initiative has examined challenges and highlighted opportunities in rural economic development, infrastructure and quality of life organized around three major pillars: Opportunity, Connectivity and Community.

The Initiative’s regional workshops attracted experts such as rural sociologist **Ben Winchester** to discuss the state of rural communities, as well as an impressive array of experts who explored food insecurity, the future of remote work, and the impact of cultural heritage and tourism. Each workshop was hosted by a fellow Western Governor, including New Mexico’s **Michelle Lujan Grisham**, Idaho’s **Brad Little**, and Oregon’s **Kate Brown**, starting with a kickoff workshop in Fargo, North Dakota.

When the impact of the pandemic became clear, WGA swiftly launched a webinar series that explored what it meant for the rural communities at the heart of the Initiative’s work. The series gathered experts who explained how to respond to the challenges facing Main Street businesses, shared best practices to combat the rise in cybersecurity threats, and offered ways to overcome new challenges in natural resources management.

Out of this extensive work, WGA has developed a special report on the Initiative that shares best practices and policy recommendations to support vibrant rural communities in the West. You will find an Executive Summary of that work in this 2020 Annual Report and the complete report on WGA’s website ([westgov.org](http://westgov.org)).

And that is just some of the policy work accomplished by Western Governors in the past year. To name just a few highlights:

- **Rural Broadband:** WGA earned victories in Congress and with federal agencies to improve broadband mapping and adopt a funding approach that benefits rural schools and libraries.
- **Invasive species:** The Governors created the Western Invasive Species Council to improve collaboration on regional efforts and advocate for the region at the federal level.
- **Shared Stewardship:** WGA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, under a Memorandum of Understanding, have been collaborating on land management with projects on wildfire disaster response, vegetation management in utility corridors, and planning to curb the spread of cheatgrass.

WGA’s tireless work to improve the state-federal relationship remains a top priority, evidenced by the launch of the Western Governors’ *Center of Excellence for Improving the State-Federal Relationship*. The online repository of WGA resources on federalism issues includes case studies, reports, correspondence and other products of the Governors’ research and policy work.

A significant benefit of WGA participation is the chance to sit down with fellow Governors to share common challenges and ideas. This year’s Cabinet Secretary Breakfast was a great example, as a record-number six cabinet members met with a dozen Western Governors to discuss regional issues at the headquarters of the Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C. Last December, 11 Governors and more than 300 others attended the 2019 Winter Meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada, for public discussions of topics such as the epidemic of missing and murdered indigenous women and advances in agriculture technology.

Over the past several months, we all have had increased appreciation for the collaborative, effective policy work of the Western Governors’ Association and of the tireless, never “typical,” work being done by Western Governors for the benefit of our great region.



With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Doug Burgum". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Doug Burgum, Governor, State of North Dakota



## Dear Friend of the West,

A headline in *The New York Times* earlier this year proclaimed, "Once Political B-Listers, Governors Lead Nation's Coronavirus Response." The accompanying article stated that, "(F)or now, the country is turning to governors, some of them little known on the national scene, for reassurance and leadership in a fashion that sharply breaks from the Washington-centric lens through which government has been viewed in a period of national and celebrity-oriented politics."

Although the notion that Governors have ever been "political B-listers" is patently absurd, there is no gainsaying that they have fought valiantly on the front lines of the national COVID-19 response.

They have made excruciatingly difficult decisions designed to contain the spread of the coronavirus, while at the same time working diligently to keep supply lines open, government operating and the economy functioning.

WGA has responded to the crisis by supporting Governors however possible. The Association has served as a research center, information clearinghouse and mechanism for Governors to discuss common issues, best practices, and cross-boundary challenges.

Despite the threat of COVID-19 and the diversion of resources to address its effects, WGA made meaningful progress throughout the year to advance the Governors' policy priorities. *Reimagining the Rural West*, the Chair's initiative of **Governor Doug Burgum** of North Dakota, represents one of the most ambitious such projects in the Association's recent history. Built around the pillars of opportunity, connectivity and community, the initiative produced findings and recommendations that will inform gubernatorial policy and WGA's rural sustainability work for years to come.

A key priority of Western Governors is improving the state-federal relationship. WGA is proud to have made demonstrable progress to advance this critical goal. Pursuant to a shared stewardship memorandum of understanding executed by WGA leadership with the Secretary of Agriculture, Western Governors are working cooperatively with the U.S. Department of Agriculture on campaigns to promote



**Jim Ogsbury addresses the 2019 Winter Meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada.**

vegetation management, cheatgrass control, and effective cross-jurisdictional response to western fire events. Our commitment to advance state-federal cooperation is also reflected in our ongoing work with federal economic development agencies to deliver assistance more efficiently to rural communities.

I am confident that WGA will emerge from the current public health crisis stronger than ever. In the immediate future, the Association will, under the leadership of its incoming Chair, **Governor Kate Brown** of Oregon, examine urgent issues in cross-jurisdictional and cross-boundary emergency management. WGA is also preparing to launch a regionally important initiative pertaining to electric vehicle deployment.

The burden of leadership is ever heavy, but never heavier than in times of crisis. Western Governors have borne this weight with dignity, resolve and compassion. It is a singular honor to be associated with them during this unprecedented time in our nation's history.

Respectfully,

James D. Ogsbury,  
WGA Executive Director

# State-Federal Relationship

- Dennis Daugaard, former Governor of South Dakota
- Matt Mead, former Governor of Wyoming
- Butch Otter, former Governor of Idaho



## REALIGNING THE STATE-FEDERAL RELATIONSHIP

Improving the state-federal relationship is among the highest priorities of Western Governors. Accordingly, WGA has established itself as a leading resource on the state-federal relationship and works to educate federal partners about legal requirements for, and benefits of, meaningful engagement with states.

States are not stakeholders. They are sovereigns, with constitutional powers, delegated authorities, and essential governmental responsibilities. Consequently, Governors aspire to work in authentic partnership with the federal government, both as co-sovereigns and co-regulators. Federal agencies should engage in meaningful consultation with states whenever a proposed federal action will affect state authorities or otherwise implicate state equities.

### USFS Public Participation Rule

**Issue:** The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in 2015 issued a Request for Information about involving the public in the formulation of its directives. WGA expressed that the proposed changes would have a detrimental effect on states' ability to monitor and comment on USFS actions.

**Action:** WGA engaged regularly with USFS to explore revisions to the proposed process that would improve states' ability to monitor and provide input on proposed USFS regulatory changes.

**Result:** WGA's engagement resulted in

several favorable changes to a Proposed Directive, published in January 2020 by USFS, to implement revised regulations governing public participation in the formulation of agency directives. Subject to finalization, the proposal now reflects the following:

- USFS has established an internet-based notice-and-comment system for interested persons to view upcoming changes;
- The Service will maintain a quarterly schedule of pending and proposed directives on the agency's website and publish the schedule in the Federal Register;
- Modifications to both the Forest Service Manual and Forest Service

Handbooks will be available for public comment;

- Proposed directives will have a minimum 30-day public comment period – up from 15 in the original proposal – and significant directives must be available for at least 60 days; and
- USFS may engage with elected officials of state, local or tribal governments to exchange views, information, or advice on proposed or interim directives without being required to charter a committee under the Federal Advisory Committee Act. This, in turn, will open the door for increased consultation with states and local communities in its policy processes.

Above: Former Western Governors, from left, C.L. "Butch" Otter, Matt Mead and Dennis Daugaard addressed the importance of the state-federal relationship at the 2019 Winter Meeting.



## Center of Excellence

WGA launched the Western Governors' *Center of Excellence for Improving the State-Federal Relationship*. The online repository of WGA resources on federalism issues includes case studies, reports, correspondence and other products of the Governors' research and policy work to improve the state-federal relationship.

The Center for Excellence was introduced at WGA's 2019 Winter Meeting in Nevada, where former governors **Dennis Daugaard** of South Dakota, **Matt Mead** of Wyoming, and **Butch Otter** of Idaho participated in the roundtable, "Discussing the Evolving State-Federal Relationship."

## Shared Stewardship Collaboration

WGA has undertaken projects developed through a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2018 with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The projects include:

### Interagency Wildfire Disaster

**Response:** WGA, in collaboration with the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, is introducing a "roadmap" of federal assistance to enable local governments and states to better address post-fire needs.

**Vegetation Management:** WGA will facilitate a dialogue between federal agencies, utilities, State Foresters, and other key partners to exchange ideas and discuss innovative uses of federal tools and authorities for projects in utility corridors. The goal is to identify a compilation of tools and authorities, combined with best practices and examples, to enhance utility corridor vegetation management work.

**Cheatgrass:** Western Governors partnered with the USFS on a project to address the spread of cheatgrass and other invasive annual grasses in the West. The Governors-appointed Western Invasive Species Council worked with state and federal agency staff to develop a toolkit for invasive grass managers.



WGA has undertaken several projects developed through a Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including development of a toolkit to address the spread of cheatgrass.

## Regional Federal Agency Leadership

During the past year, WGA substantially expanded its efforts to work more closely with the Western regional leadership of multiple federal agencies. WGA hosted two gatherings of numerous agency officials to address several cross-jurisdictional, cross-border issues in the West.

WGA produced a webinar series gathering feedback and increasing regional communications about response to the pandemic. Of note was the *COVID-19 Economic Impacts and Mitigation in Rural Communities* segment. The webinar, which highlights federal resources available to rural communities to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic, features regional leadership of the Departments of Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency, Small Business Administration and Federal Emergency Management Agency.

WGA continues to pursue cooperative efforts with these agencies and others, especially with respect to securing the economic future of the rural West.



# CONNECTIVITY

Western Governors are leaders in the effort to expand rural and tribal community access to broadband infrastructure and other connectivity solutions. WGA has advocated for improved broadband coverage maps and flexible funding strategies that promote rural connectivity. The Governors' new Policy Resolution, *Broadband Connectivity*, contains recommendations and strategies to accelerate broadband deployment.

## Rural Broadband

Broadband internet is a modern-day necessity for businesses, individuals, schools and government. Western Governors have successfully engaged with Congress and federal agencies to address the challenge of increasing broadband access in rural and tribal areas across the West.

### Data and Mapping

**Issue:** Knowing precisely where broadband access is not available informs effective investment of public dollars. The *Broadband DATA Act*, S. 1822, addresses those investments.

**Action:** Governors conducted substantial outreach to federal agencies and Congress in support of the *Broadband DATA Act*. WGA provided testimony for the House Committee on Energy and Commerce hearing, "Legislating to Connect America: Improving the Nation's Broadband Maps," and hosted a webinar on *Broadband Data and Mapping* that included an in-depth discussion of S. 1822 by Congressional staffers.

**Result:** The Governors' efforts produced an important legislative victory with the enactment of S. 1822 in March 2020.

## Federal Communications Commission

The FCC is the federal agency primarily responsible for supporting rural broadband deployment. Western Governors have provided significant feedback on FCC rulemakings affecting rural and tribal broadband access.

**Issue:** Prior to a pilot funding approach adopted in 2014, rural schools and libraries struggled to access requisite



**Idaho-based Fatbeam installs fiber-based networks, such as this one, that help expand broadband connectivity in the West.**

funding for internal connectivity upgrades through the FCC's E-Rate Program.

**Action:** Western Governors advocated for the permanent adoption of the pilot funding approach and highlighted additional strategies to encourage E-Rate participation by rural schools and libraries.

**Result:** The FCC permanently adopted the pilot funding model in December 2019 and incorporated the Governors' suggested changes to ease administrative burdens for rural schools and libraries.

## More Connectivity Options

During the past year, the Governors also highlighted how rural schools and tribes can provide community connectivity solutions through use of Educational Broadband Service spectrum. Additionally, in the context of a proposed rule issued by the FCC, WGA promoted the use of TV White Spaces, an innovative connectivity solution for rural communities.

## U.S. Department of Agriculture

USDA manages many rural broadband deployment programs that support infrastructure investment in western states. Western Governors consider USDA a valuable partner in delivering connectivity solutions across the West.

### ReConnect Program

**Issue:** USDA recently launched ReConnect, its flagship broadband infrastructure program.

**Action:** Governors offered significant feedback on the ReConnect Program, addressing eligibility criteria and priority areas for investment.

**Result:** The ReConnect Program has funded 22 grant and seven loan-grant awards in WGA states, totaling approximately \$123 million and \$109 million, respectively.

## Permitting Broadband Infrastructure

**Issue:** The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) manages the permitting and siting of broadband infrastructure on its lands across the West. Efficient and consistent permitting practices can help accelerate broadband infrastructure deployment in rural areas.

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**Action:** WGA provided supportive comments on a proposed rule to modernize and accelerate USFS's practices for permitting broadband infrastructure.

**Result:** In April 2020, USFS published the final rule, maintaining all of the elements supported by WGA.

## Cybersecurity

The digital connectivity that supports economic growth and improved quality of life also presents challenges. Western Governors, guided by the policy resolution *Cybersecurity*, are committed to increase the cybersecurity workforce, protect the supply chain, and discourage cyber intrusions by nation-state actors.

**Issue:** Energy production, storage, transmission and distribution infrastructure is a frequent target of cyber attacks. Safeguarding the nation's energy infrastructure is of paramount importance to Governors.

**Action:** Western Governors advocated for the enactment of H.R. 680, the *Securing Energy Infrastructure Act*, in outreach to the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology. The bill establishes a pilot program within the Department of Energy's national laboratories to identify security vulnerabilities in the energy sector and evaluate technology that can be used to isolate the most critical systems from cyberattacks.

**Result:** H.R. 680 was incorporated into the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020.

## Additional Actions

Western Governors advocated for congressional cybersecurity bills that address governmental and election infrastructure security. Additionally, WGA and the Department of Homeland Security collaborated on a briefing about cybersecurity threats associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, at the 2019 Winter Meeting, Governors discussed the use of blockchain to secure government data and thwart cyber attacks.



# COVID-19 RESPONSE

Western Governors have been on the front lines battling the coronavirus pandemic, making difficult decisions daily about testing protocols, quarantine, suspension of commercial activities, and reopening of their states. WGA has committed the full measure of its resources to assist the Governors. In particular, the Association has conducted research on state housing of non-resident COVID-19 patients, resources available to states under federal stimulus legislation, and rapid response plans for rural outbreak clusters, among many other issues.

## Federal Outreach

The Association engaged with Congress and federal agencies to ensure that the needs of western states were closely considered.

**Oil and Gas Royalties:** WGA insisted that the Department of the Interior engage with states regarding proposals to suspend or reduce onshore oil and gas royalties, as they are an integral component of many western states' budgets and suspending their collection would have a direct negative effect on states and local governments.

**PILT & SRS:** The Governors reminded Congressional leadership that long-term certainty of revenue streams from Payment in Lieu of Taxes and Secure Rural Schools programs must remain a high priority. These resources will help rural communities invest in healthcare

infrastructure and other critical needs during the pandemic.

**Staff Support:** The Governors requested that federal agencies offer coordinated support for western rural counties and municipalities with limited staff capacity to respond to COVID-19. "One of the most significant resources you have is the thousands of federal civil servants with relevant experience to assist with emergency response," noted a letter signed by WGA Chair North Dakota **Gov. Doug Burgum** and Vice Chair Oregon **Gov. Kate Brown**.

## Webinars

WGA has focused on COVID-19 effects on rural communities and their path forward to economic recovery through the Chair Initiative, *Reimagining the Rural West*. Initiative webinars have featured:

- A three-part series on COVID-19 Economic Impacts and Mitigation in Rural Communities;
- Rural Health Response to the coronavirus;
- Improving Airports and Air Service in the Rural West; and
- Cybersecurity Threats & Best Practices.

## Communications

WGA developed "COVID-19 in the West," a weekly state-by-state breakdown of the Governors' policy work that is featured prominently on WGA's website, social media and email communications. In addition, the Association produced a weekly 'special edition' of its Best of the West news roundup, featuring the latest developments related to the pandemic from across the region.





# REIMAGINING THE RURAL WEST INITIATIVE

North Dakota **Governor Doug Burgum**, Chair of the Western Governors' Association, launched *Reimagining the Rural West* in July 2019 to strengthen rural communities across the West. Rural communities face substantial challenges, but trends and technological innovations in recent years have also presented enormous opportunity. The Initiative leveraged the expertise and experience of rural stakeholders to help Western Governors support vibrant and prosperous rural communities.

*Reimagining the Rural West* began with surveys and stakeholder outreach to identify the most pressing challenges and promising opportunities facing rural communities. Respondents from across the West helped to focus the initiative on three pillars: Opportunity, Connectivity, and Community.

The Initiative subsequently convened a workshop and webinar series to explore these topics in depth. Workshops were hosted by Western Governors **Doug Burgum** in North Dakota, **Michelle Lujan Grisham** in New Mexico, **Brad Little** in Idaho and **Kate Brown** in a virtual workshop after the COVID-19 pandemic precluded gathering in Oregon. Workshops and webinars assembled local leaders, state policymakers, federal partners, community development organizations, business leaders, and rural experts to share best practices and discuss policy recommendations. After the emergence of the COVID-19 public health crisis, the Initiative shifted its focus to the impacts of the pandemic on rural communities and held several webinars on response and recovery.

The *Reimagining the Rural West Special Report* presents the Initiative's findings and recommendations to strengthen rural communities using the three thematic pillars. This report presents the Initiative's findings and recommendations.

**Opportunity:** Economic development in the rural West should strive to create an environment in which everyone – new entrepreneurs, seasoned business owners, recent graduates starting a



**WGA Chair Doug Burgum launched the Initiative to help rural communities successfully tap into the opportunities offered by an increasingly technological world.**

career, and midcareer workers pursuing new skills – has the chance to succeed and prosper.

- **Increase flexibility of economic development funds to include investments in community assets that improve quality of life.** Development programs that focus on quality of life help build rural communities that are desirable places to live and work. Such programs also promote business development and draw new residents while protecting the community's rural character.
- **Create an environment in which businesses, entrepreneurs and remote workers prosper.** Fostering a stable

and diverse base of small businesses and location-neutral jobs increases resiliency and provides more and varied opportunities for innovation and growth.

- **Educate and train rural citizens for the jobs available in their communities.** A nimble and responsive workforce development system that integrates K-12 education, post-secondary education, and regional employers is needed to keep pace with economic change.

**Connectivity:** Improve the quality of connectivity in rural areas, including broadband and transportation networks,

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so that rural communities can access essential goods and services, plug in to the global economy, and enjoy the myriad benefits that ease of connection provides.

- **Increase and improve broadband connectivity.** Improvements in mapping, better coordination in deployment, and increased investment are all needed to expand connectivity in the rural West.
- **Improve the quality of transportation connectivity.** Good transportation networks are essential to rural quality of life, connecting residents to jobs, educational opportunities, health care, and social services that may be unavailable in their immediate community. In the West, where rural areas are vast and communities are separated by rugged terrain, air service is a necessity.

**Community:** Deliver the tools and resources to enable rural communities to provide residents with basic needs such as clean water, housing and food security. Empower local decisionmakers in the development and implementation of their own vision for the future.

- **Strengthen local leadership and capacity.** More funding, and more consistent funding, is needed for institutions, training, and technical assistance to help communities comprehensively address development needs and conduct post-disaster recovery work.
- **Improve the efficacy of federal and state programs to support critical infrastructure in the rural West.** Rural applicants must navigate a complex bureaucracy of federal and state programs to access the resources they need to strengthen their communities. Federal agencies should work with each other and with state agencies to ensure their programs are as accessible as possible to rural communities.

*Reimagining the Rural West* provided a valuable regional forum to highlight the immense opportunity in the region and to examine the work that remains to be done so that rural communities have the tools and resources they need to achieve their full potential.



From top: Governors Brad Little of Idaho, Michelle Lujan Grisham of New Mexico and Kate Brown of Oregon hosted workshops at which experts discussed the challenges facing rural communities.



Read, download the Reimagining the Rural West Initiative report at [Westgov.org](https://www.westgov.org)



# WORKING LANDS ROUNDTABLE

The Working Lands Roundtable is a platform for the performance of WGA policy work and the implementation of gubernatorial priorities relating to natural resources in the West. The Roundtable examines regional resource management issues and assembles a broad coalition of stakeholders to identify emerging threats to western working landscapes. In 2019, WGA convened two Roundtable workshops — tapping the expertise of hundreds of resource management and policy experts — and executed a Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to pursue collaborative projects regarding wildfire response, vegetation management and invasive annual grasses.

## **Collaborative Conservation**

Western states are home to diverse and bountiful fish and wildlife populations, which contribute to economic opportunity and quality of life. Investments in fish and wildlife conservation are imperative to maintaining resilient working landscapes managed according to principles of multiple use.

Species conservation and working lands development are, however, often characterized as competing

interests. Rejecting this narrative, WGA is leading an effort through the Roundtable to develop holistic, collaborative, proactive and innovative solutions to challenges facing western fish and wildlife populations. This effort to advance collaborative conservation will yield opportunities for more proactive conservation of at-risk species and facilitate greater coordination among stakeholder groups to conserve mutually identified priority habitats and working landscapes.

## **Next Steps**

WGA will continue its ongoing work and identify emerging challenges to cross-boundary working lands conservation in the West. This effort will be pursued in part through biannual Roundtable workshops and working groups. In 2020, WGA will facilitate discussions on natural resource data mobilization and standardization, and socio-economic factors that influence the health of working landscapes.

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Idaho Gov. Brad Little hosted a Working Lands Roundtable meeting in Boise in 2019.



# WORKING LANDS ROUNDTABLE

## INVASIVE SPECIES

Invasive species cause substantial harm to ecosystems, economies, and communities in the West. Western Governors, guided by WGA Policy Resolution 2019-06, *Biosecurity and Invasive Species Management*, have created the Western Invasive Species Council, sought new mechanisms to enhance regional invasive species coordination, and shared recommendations with Congress and federal agencies on improving invasive species management.

### Western Invasive Species Council

Western Governors launched the Western Invasive Species Council (WISC) in 2019 to enhance coordination between states, improve collaboration on regional biosecurity and invasive species control efforts, and advocate for regional needs at the federal level.

To date, 17 Western Governors have appointed members to WISC, created as part of the Policy Resolution on *Biosecurity and Invasive Species Management*. The council, which meets quarterly, addresses cross boundary and cross jurisdictional invasive species management challenges identified by the Governors. Among these efforts are projects to identify best practices that prevent the movement of feral swine along interstate and international borders and address the large-scale infestation of cheatgrass and other invasive annual grasses across the West.

WISC has formed an interagency committee to discuss ways to stop the movement of feral swine across interstate and international borders. Since forming in February, this committee has worked to develop a transboundary action plan that includes short- and long-term strategies and goals.

The cheatgrass project is producing a toolkit for land managers to address the spread of invasive annual grasses in the West, including species such as cheatgrass, medusahead, and ventanata. The toolkit is comprised of three elements: 1) a roadmap for invasive grass management in the West, with new best management practices for the identification and protection of



Attendees of the WGA Invasive Mussel Leadership Forum hosted by Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak watched a live demonstration of watercraft inspection and decontamination at Lake Mead National Recreation Area. (Photo courtesy National Park Service)

relatively intact “core” areas; 2) case studies highlighting the application of these practices in Idaho and Wyoming; and 3) a new geospatial data layer to help state and local officials manage invasive annual grasses at home, while also offering opportunities to identify new cross-boundary collaborative projects.

### Invasive Mussels

Western Governors continue to vigorously protect western waters from the spread of aquatic invasive species, including invasive quagga and zebra mussels.

The Governors supported the bipartisan legislation, *Stop the Spread of Invasive Mussels Act* of 2019, which would empower state and federal agencies to act as full partners in invasive species containment efforts to more effectively

combat the spread of aquatic invasive species in western waters.

The Governors also applauded the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for releasing the new manual, *Dreissenid Mussel Rapid Response in the Columbia River Basin*. The manual resulted from a prior collaboration between the U.S. Department of the Interior, WGA, states, tribes, federal agencies, and others to address invasive mussels.

In August 2019, Western Governors hosted the WGA Invasive Mussel Leadership Forum in Las Vegas, Nevada, at which Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak presented a keynote address. The forum assembled state, federal and tribal agency staff to determine common interagency priorities for the prevention and containment of invasive zebra and quagga mussels in the western U.S.

# WORKING LANDS ROUNDTABLE



## FOREST AND RANGELAND MANAGEMENT

### Shared Stewardship MOU

Under a Shared Stewardship Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), WGA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have been collaboratively addressing many regional land management needs.

#### Interagency Wildfire Disaster

**Response:** WGA, in collaboration with the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, is introducing a “roadmap” of federal assistance to help local governments and states to better address post-fire needs. It will promote federal interagency cooperation in post-disaster response and improved coordination with state and local governments, working toward a goal of more cost-effective, time-efficient, and durable post-fire restoration projects.

**Vegetation Management:** WGA assembled a working group of utilities and state and federal agency staff to explore how to improve vegetation management rules and protocols. The principal goal is to reduce wildfire risk

in utility corridors. WGA is also compiling applicable tools, authorities and best practices, to enhance utility corridor vegetation management.

**Cheatgrass:** Western Governors partnered with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to address the spread of cheatgrass and other invasive annual grasses in the West. The Western Invasive Species Council, whose members are appointed by Western Governors, worked with state and federal agency staff to develop a toolkit for invasive grass managers. The toolkit contains a new data layer of invasive grass prevalence in the West, best practices for invasive grass management, and case studies of cross-boundary efforts to utilize those best practices.

WGA and USDA are considering additional areas for collaboration under the Shared Stewardship MOU.

#### Wildfire

Western Governors have long supported efforts to end the practice of “fire borrowing,” by which federal agencies

divert funds from forest health and fire prevention programs to pay for wildland firefighting operations. After years of encouraging Congress to end this budgetary practice, a fire borrowing fix was enacted, and the FY2020 appropriations cycle marks the first federal budget in years to preclude fire borrowing. This represents a significant victory for Western Governors and will improve fire and land management in western states.

Western Governors earned another significant policy victory when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued its “Final Exceptional Events Guidance: Prescribed Fire on Wildland that May Influence Ozone and Particulate Matter Concentrations.” Western Governors thanked EPA for consulting with states and incorporating the expertise of state air quality agencies into the Guidance. The directive includes simplified exceptional events guidance for prescribed fire and additional tools to address the air quality effects of uncharacteristic wildfire.



As part of the Shared Stewardship Memorandum of Understanding with USDA, WGA is collaborating with the Wildland Fire Leadership Council to introduce a “roadmap” of federal assistance to enable local governments and states to better address post-fire needs.



# WORKING LANDS ROUNDTABLE



Clean, reliable water supplies are a crucial resource for communities, industries, habitats, and farms, essential to maintaining quality of life and ecosystems throughout the West. States are best suited to speak to the unique nature of their water laws and hydrology and are primarily responsible for water supply planning within their boundaries. WGA continues Western Governors' long history of successful policy development and advocacy for the protection of states' primary authority over the management, allocation, development, and protection of water resources.

## U.S. Corps of Engineers Reservoir Operations

**Issue:** The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' proposed Water Supply Rule would have asserted authority over, and limited states' ability to access, waters expressly reserved to states under federal law and the U.S. Constitution.

**Action:** WGA has served for years as a national leader in protecting states from the impacts of the proposed rule through vigorous advocacy to regulatory and congressional leadership. In the past year, WGA further exercised its leadership by establishing a coalition of state associations, which urged the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in August 2019 to withdraw the proposed rule. The coalition also

asked that the Corps recognize state authority under a system of cooperative federalism.

Citing the coalition's work, a bipartisan group of 19 western U.S. Senators wrote to OMB in September 2019, advocating that, "the Water Supply Rule be withdrawn, and the Corps be instructed to comply with state water laws in the exercise of its authority." The Senators also echoed the Governors' concerns that, "the Corps has failed to meaningfully consult with states, on a government-to-government level, during the development of the Proposed Rule, contrary to the directives of Executive Order 13132 [Federalism]."

**Result:** The Corps announced a six-month suspension of the rulemaking

process for the Water Supply Rule in September 2019, then announced its official withdrawal of the proposed rule in January 2020. While this was a significant victory for Western Governors, WGA continues to pursue legislative solutions to prevent the emergence of a similar rule in the future. The Governors also demand that the Corps' reservoir operations recognize and defer to state laws and authority.

## State Authority over Groundwater Resources

In House and Senate testimony on FY20 appropriations, Western Governors encouraged Congress to adopt express and unambiguous language to

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The Oahe Dam on the Missouri River, operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, creates Lake Oahe, the fourth largest man-made reservoir in the country.

# WORKING LANDS ROUNDTABLE

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protect states' plenary authority over groundwater resources and provide clear direction to federal administrative agencies to respect such authority.

FY20 Senate Appropriations report language expresses that the federal Clean Water Act (CWA) regulates impacts to navigable waters, while regulation of groundwater remains outside the Act's jurisdiction. The report language also notes that, through the CWA, Congress intended for groundwater pollutants to be regulated through the CWA's non-point source program and other federal and state laws.

## Federal Water Legislation

WGA continues to advocate for federal legislation that advances the water policies of Western Governors, including:

- Support for provisions of S. 1932, the *Drought Resiliency and Water Supply Infrastructure Act* and a request

for the addition of language for the statutory codification of EPA's Water Transfers Rule;

- Delivery of testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, expressing Western Governors' support for *America's Water Infrastructure Act* of 2020 and the *Drinking Water Act* of 2020. The Governors also requested additional provisions to address: state authority over waters impounded in Corps' reservoirs; enhanced federal aquatic invasive species management authority; and the statutory codification of EPA's Water Transfers Rule; and
- Requests in FY 21 House and Senate Appropriations testimony for:
  - Adequate and dedicated funding for federal water supply data programs, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting and watershed restoration
- Express prohibition of the use of FY 21 appropriations funds for any activity that would, or has the potential to, usurp states' plenary authority over groundwater resources, as well as language ensuring that state authority over groundwater resources is respected by federal administrative agencies.
- Robust federal investment in water delivery and wastewater infrastructure;
- Adequate and dedicated funding of EPA's Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds and the Water Infrastructure Financing Innovation Act; and

programs; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Integrated Drought Information System; and the U.S. Geological Survey's Groundwater and Streamflow Information Program;

## SPECIES MANAGEMENT

### Task Force on Collaborative Conservation

WGA created the Task Force on Collaborative Conservation to develop policy recommendations to increase the efficacy and incidence of proactive, voluntary species conservation efforts. The Task Force consists of state and federal government officials; non-governmental organizations; landowner, agricultural and industry representatives; and other stakeholders. The Task Force is working on regional conservation strategies for at-risk species, while enhancing the integrity and viability of western working landscapes.

Western Governors have long recognized voluntary approaches to species conservation as a valuable, collaborative alternative to regulatory

species protections. Task Force recommendations will encourage innovation and regulatory flexibility, utilize cross-boundary and interdisciplinary approaches to conserve large-scale threats to working landscapes, and promote greater coordination among land management partners.

### Appropriations

**State Wildlife Data:** For the seventh consecutive year, Congress directed the Department of the Interior and the United States Forest Service to utilize state fish and wildlife data and analyses to inform land use, land planning and related natural resource decisions.

**Collaborative Conservation:** In the 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act, Congress encouraged Federal agencies

to, "coordinate with the Western Governors' Association on collaborative conservation efforts benefiting wildlife and the lands they rely on."

**Settlement Agreements:** Congress adopted appropriations language in 2020 urging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to avoid entering into multi-species settlement agreements unless government officials in the states where the species are located are a party to that agreement.

**Endangered Species Act Transparency:** 2020 Appropriations language encouraged increased transparency in ESA decision-making. However, this does not include sharing of information that a state or Governor has determined is prohibited by a law relating to the protection of personal information.



# WORKING LANDS ROUNDTABLE



## PUBLIC LANDS

### NEPA Improvements

Western Governors have long been leaders in addressing sage grouse conservation and invasive annual grasses management. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) adopted identical National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) categorical exclusions (CEs) in 2020 promoting restorative vegetation management activities in sage grouse and mule deer habitat. These CEs, in a victory that reflects Governors' multi-year advocacy, will help increase the pace, scale and cross-boundary coordination of cheatgrass control, native vegetation seeding, and habitat restoration on public lands.

Additionally, the BLM adopted a suite of statutorily established CEs that: streamline grazing permit renewal processes; standardize grazing practices; and support responsible energy management on public lands. The Governors' policy resolutions on *Public Lands Grazing* and *Energy in the West* contain recommendations that align with the procedures established in the CEs.

The USFS proposed substantial updates to its agency-specific NEPA procedures in June 2019. Western Governors have



Crater Lake, Oregon. NPS photo

consistently advocated for flexible and responsible strategies to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the NEPA process. USFS's proposed rule delivers multiple victories for Western Governors, as it would establish a landscape-scale CE supporting forest restoration activities and clarify the agency's use of "determination of NEPA adequacy" procedures and "extraordinary circumstances" reviews. The proposed changes are awaiting final approval by the Office of Management and Budget.

### PILT & SRS Funding

The federal government must honor its historic Payment In Lieu of Taxes (PILT) agreement with states and counties in the West and provide predictable and full funding for Secure Rural Schools (SRS) programs. As the Governors note in their renewed Policy Resolution, *Tax-Exempt Federal Lands and Secure Rural Schools*, these payments are vital to the provision of state and county public goods and services, such as roads, emergency response, and wildlife and natural resources protection. Thanks to the Governors' continued advocacy, FY20 Appropriations included full funding for PILT and reauthorization of SRS.

### National Park Service Maintenance Backlog

Western Governors have consistently urged Congressional leadership to fund deferred National Park Service maintenance projects, which total over \$12 billion in estimated costs. Acknowledging the importance of this gubernatorial priority, Congress allocated an additional \$75 million in FY20 funding to address deferred maintenance needs.



## HEALTH CARE

COVID-19 has not been the only health care concern confronting Western Governors.

The Governors approved an updated resolution, *Physical and Behavioral Health Care in Western States*. It affirms that patients should have the same access to behavioral health care as they have for physical health care, signals the importance of integrating physical and behavioral health services, and supports efforts to improve the quality and quantity of behavioral health services.

The resolution also recognizes the role that social determinants of health



**Barbara Collins is the Principal of Mission High School in Las Vegas, the nation's first public school for students in recovery from substance abuse. She spoke about the school's mission with the Governors at the 2019 Winter Meeting.**

(SDOH) – including economic stability, education, social and community context, and neighborhood and built environment – have on health outcomes and well-being. Accordingly, the Governors encouraged Congress to consider H.R. 4004, the *Social Determinants Accelerator Act*, as a tool

to help states and local governments consider and address SDOH, as social factors, "have an enormous influence on individual health risks and outcomes."

At WGA's 2019 Winter Meeting, the Governors hosted a public conversation with **Barbara Collins**, the principal of Mission High School in Las Vegas, about her experience at the first public school in the nation designed for students in recovery from substance misuse. Her powerful testimony led to an engaging discussion with Governors on how to improve behavioral health access in states and address the needs of at-risk youth.





# MEETINGS AND OUTREACH

At meetings in Colorado and Nevada, Western Governors engaged in spirited public conversations regarding some of the region's most pressing public policy issues. U.S. Cabinet Secretaries and other influential thought leaders joined the Governors for these discussions.

## MEETINGS

### 2019 Annual Meeting June 10-12, Vail, Colorado

The Annual Meeting drew 12 Governors and nearly 400 attendees to Colorado for public discussions on boosting rural broadband capability, the dangerous growth of illicit fentanyl, and WGA's creation of online education pioneer Western Governors University. The Governors released the *Biosecurity and Invasive Species Initiative Special Report* and announced projects to be implemented under a Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

**ATTENDING GOVERNORS:** Top photo, from left: then WGA Vice Chair **Doug Burgum** (North Dakota), **Laura Kelly** (Kansas), **Kristi Noem** (South Dakota), then WGA Chair **David Ige** (Hawai'i), **Brad Little** (Idaho) **Lou Leon Guerrero** (Guam), **Jared Polis** (Colorado), **Gary Herbert** (Utah), **Steve Sisolak** (Nevada), **Kate Brown** (Oregon), and **Mark Gordon** (Wyoming). Not pictured, but in attendance, **Michelle Lujan Grisham** (New Mexico).

**SPEAKERS:** Administration guests included Interior Secretary **David Bernhardt** and Housing and Urban Development Secretary **Ben Carson**. Keynote speakers included Vail Resorts CEO **Rob Katz**, best-selling author **Craig Johnson**, pollster **Frank Luntz**, and Royal Canadian Mounted Police Sergeant **Eric Boechler**.

**WESTERN GOVERNORS' FOUNDATION:** WGA debuted its reinvented foundation, which leverages the collective influence, camaraderie and commitment of former and current Western Governors to promote the welfare of the West.

**RESOLUTIONS:** The Governors formally approved policy resolutions on *Federal-State Land Exchanges and Purchases*, *Biosecurity and Invasive Species*



*Management, National Parks and the West, and Wildlife Migration Corridors and Habitat.*

### 2019 Winter Meeting Dec. 13-14, Las Vegas, Nevada

Eleven Governors and more than 300 attendees gathered for public discussions of such important topics as reinvigorating rural economies in the West, the epidemic of missing and murdered indigenous women, and advances in agriculture technology. WGA also launched the *Western Governors' Center of Excellence for Improving the State-Federal Relationship*, an online repository of resources on federalism issues.

**ATTENDING GOVERNORS:** Bottom photo, from left, bottom row: **Brad Little**

(Idaho), **Gary Herbert** (Utah), WGA Vice Chair **Kate Brown** (Oregon), **Doug Ducey** (Arizona), **Jared Polis** (Colorado). From left, top row: **David Ige** (Hawaii), WGA Chair **Doug Burgum** (North Dakota), **Kevin Stitt** (Oklahoma), **Kristi Noem** (South Dakota), **Steve Bullock** (Montana), and **Steve Sisolak** (Nevada).

**SPEAKERS:** **Beth Ford**, CEO of Land O'Lakes, and entrepreneur and inventor **Dean Kamen**.

**RESOLUTIONS:** The Governors formally approved policy resolutions on *Strengthening the State-Federal Relationship*, *States' Share of Royalties and Leasing Revenues from Federal Lands and Minerals*, *Tax-Exempt Federal Lands and Secure Rural Schools*, *Financial Assurance Regulation*, and *Physical and Behavioral Health Care in Western States*.





## Cabinet Secretary Breakfast

Six cabinet members met with a dozen Western Governors to discuss regional issues during the annual Cabinet Secretary Breakfast meeting in February at the headquarters of the Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C. Governors and Cabinet members at the event included, from left in photo above: **Eugene Scalia** (Labor), **Kristi Noem** (South Dakota), **Kevin Stitt** (Oklahoma), **Jared Polis** (Colorado), **Andrew Wheeler** (Environmental Protection Agency), **Steve Sisolak** (Nevada), **David Ige** (Hawaii), **David Bernhardt** (Interior), **Gary Herbert** (Utah), **Steve Bullock** (Montana), **Laura Kelly** (Kansas), **Brad Little** (Idaho), **Kate Brown** (Oregon), **Doug Burgum** (North Dakota), **Lou Leon Guerrero** (Guam), **Ben Carson** (Housing and Urban Development), **Betsy DeVos** (Education), **Sonny Perdue** (Agriculture), and WGA Executive Director **Jim Ogsbury**.

## Media Coverage

Western Governors continued to receive extensive positive media exposure, with coverage of their policy work noted in more than 160 stories and op-eds that appeared on more than 1,300 media outlets during the past year. The media covered such topics as the Annual and Winter meetings, the *Reimagining the*

*Rural West Initiative*, Clean Water Act, Working Lands Roundtable, the launch of the Western Invasive Species Council, and the Mussels Forum hosted by WGA in Las Vegas.

Much of this coverage was included in significant media outlets throughout the country, including *Politico*, *The Hill*, *E&E News Greenwire*, *Associated Press*, *Bloomberg*, *Stateline/Pew*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *National Review*, *New York Post*, *Washington Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Las Vegas Review Journal*, *Huffington Post*, *Breitbart*, *United Press International*, *Fox News*, *Governing*, *Yahoo Finance*, *Denver Post*, *The Missoulian*, *Bismarck Tribune*, *Miami Herald*, *Colorado Springs Gazette*, *Fargo Forum*, *Idaho Statesman*, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, and the *Albuquerque Journal*.

## DIGITAL OUTREACH

### 'Out West' Podcast Debut

WGA expanded its digital footprint with the launch of *Out West*, the official podcast of the Western Governors' Association. The podcast was introduced in January with a series on *Reimagining the Rural West*, the Chairman's Initiative of North Dakota Governor and WGA Chair Doug Burgum. Each episode of

the series highlights different aspects of the Initiative, examining challenges and opportunities in rural economic development, infrastructure, and quality of life in the West. The podcast, which has been downloaded more than 1,000 times, may be heard on the WGA website, as well as on the platforms of Podbean, Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

### Livestreaming, Video

WGA hosted its first full-scale virtual meeting, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced cancellation of a planned Chairman's Initiative workshop during March in Oregon. That inaugural effort, along with livestream broadcasts of 30 other Initiative workshop sessions, 13 webinars, and two videos produced by WGA, attracted more than 6,600 views and 1,200 hours of viewing during the year on WGA's YouTube Channel.

### Website, Social Media

Traffic on WGA's website experienced steady growth throughout the 2020 Fiscal Year, with *Reimagining the Rural West* webpages alone earning more than 15,000 pageviews. Aggressive social media outreach efforts continued on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, which deliver up to 50,000 impressions a day to WGA's followers.



# CELEBRATE THE WEST



From left: *Cowboy Dream* by Julia Pachev; *Long Day's Work* by Alexandria Hagerman; *Snow in the Desert* by Michelle Yao.

The fourth year of WGA's *Celebrate the West* regional art competition challenged high school students to create works inspired by their state or life in the West. More than 450 pieces of art from the 19 WGA member states, as well as Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, were entered in the competition. Winning artwork was displayed at WGA's 2019 Annual Meeting in Colorado, where meeting attendees viewed the winning artwork from each state and voted for the top three overall.

## Top Three

- **Julia Pachev of Utah** took home first place (\$1,250) for the charcoal pencil piece, *Cowboy Dream*.
- **Alexandria Hagerman of Hays High School in Kansas** took home second place (\$750) for the graphite and charcoal drawing, *Long Day's Work*.
- **Michelle Yao of Arizona College Prep Erie in Arizona** took home third place (\$500) for the oil painting *Snow in the Desert*.

View all the "Celebrate the West" winning entries on the WGA website:

[Westgov.org/  
celebrate-the-west](https://www.westgov.org/celebrate-the-west)

## 2019 State Winners

- **Alaska:** Megan Kline, South Anchorage High School, *Cornelia*, acrylic paint
- **Arizona:** Michelle Yao, Arizona College Prep Erie, *Snow in the Desert*, oil paint
- **California:** Hannah Pon, Ruth Asawa School for the Arts, *Forward Steps*, oil painting
- **Colorado:** Elisia Fernandez, Harrison High School, *Golden Mountains*, acrylic paint
- **Guam:** Jasmine Sun, Academy of Our Lady of Guam, *Nature at Bay*, oil pastel with colored pencil
- **Hawai'i:** Berkana McDowell, Le Jardin Academy, *Ho'omana'o Kauai*, hard pastels
- **Idaho:** Cason Neal, Homeschool, *Mountain Beauty*, acrylic paint
- **Kansas:** Alexandria Hagerman, Hays High School, *Long Day's Work*, graphite and charcoal
- **Montana:** Tawnya Thompson, Homeschool, *A Treasured Moment*, watercolor
- **Nevada:** Spencer Gabe, Bishop Gorman High School, *Heatwave*, oil paint
- **New Mexico:** Mariana Quiroz Fonseca, Cibola High School, *Sunrise on the Sandia*, acrylic paint
- **North Dakota:** Rose Soori, Fargo North High School, *In the Badlands*, acrylic paint
- **Northern Mariana Islands:** Kelly Ann Sablan Pangelinan, Kagman High School, *The Culture in the Island of Saipan*, acrylic paint
- **Oklahoma:** Grace Lee, Freshman Academy Broken Arrow, *Green Deserts*, acrylic paint
- **Oregon:** Daelyn Wilson, Oregon Virtual Academy, *The Relentless Mountains*, oil paint
- **South Dakota:** Camryn Bird, New Technology High School, *The Great Spirit*, oil pastel
- **Utah:** Julia Pachev, Homeschool, *Cowboy Dream*, charcoal pencil
- **Washington:** Yaxuan Mao, Issaquah High School, *Sunlit*, oil paint
- **Wyoming:** Anne Harder, Homeschool, *The Truly Wild West*, oil and acrylic paints



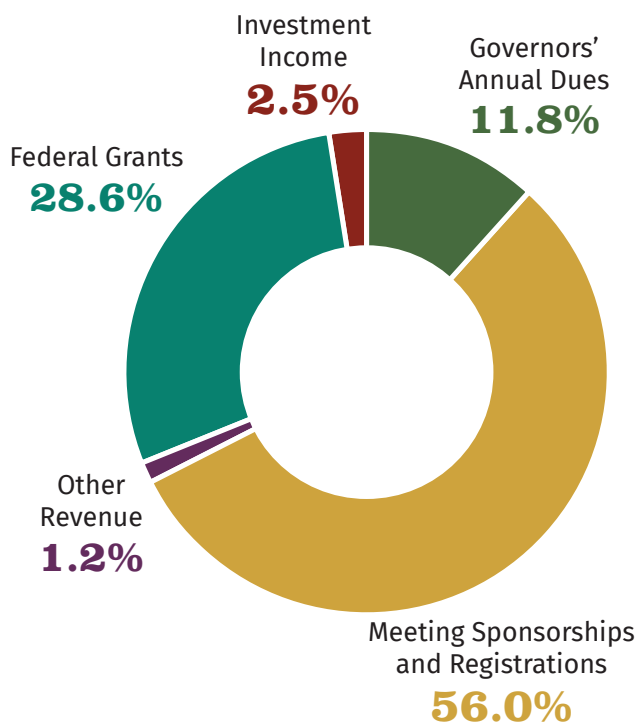


# FINANCES

WGA income is derived from Western Governors’ annual dues, sponsor contributions, meeting registration fees, grants, investment income, and other sources. WGA income totaled \$5 million for the fiscal year, with approximately 29% of that amount received from federal agencies to provide technical assistance to states and other contractors. The following is excerpted from the audit report of JDS Professional Group, Certified Public Accountants, Consultants and Advisors. The information is for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2019.

## Revenues

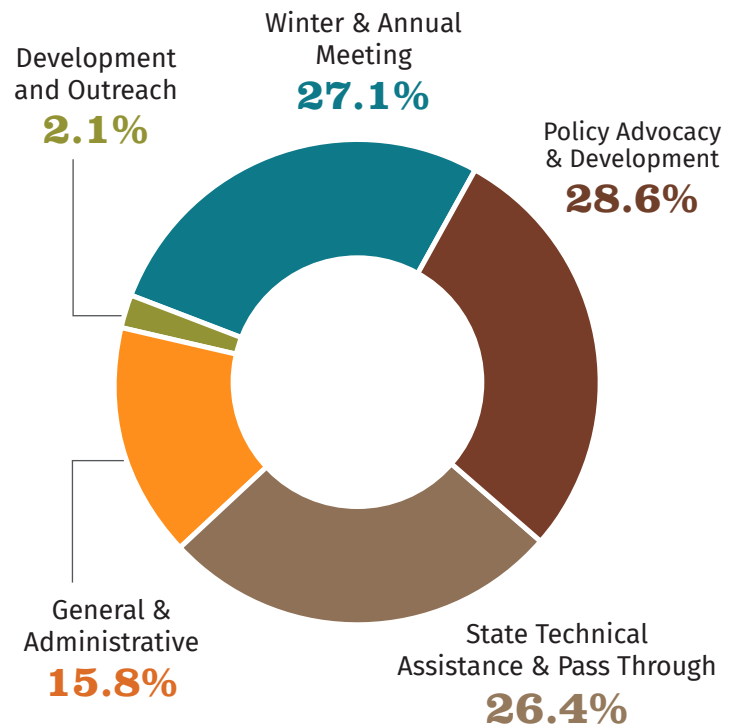
July 1, 2018—June 30, 2019



Governors' Annual Dues	\$594,000
Meeting Sponsorships and Registrations	\$2,823,885
Federal Grants	\$1,440,593
Investment Income	\$125,171
Other Revenue	\$58,069
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$5,041,718</b>

## Expenses

July 1, 2018—June 30, 2019



Policy Advocacy and Development	\$1,426,379
State Technical Assistance and Pass Through Funds	\$1,316,432
General & Admin	\$787,595
Development and Outreach	\$106,325
Winter & Annual Meeting	\$1,349,788
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$4,986,519</b>

# WESTERN GOVERNORS

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

**Governor Doug Burgum**  
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WGA Chair

**Governor Kate Brown**  
Oregon  
WGA Vice Chair

**Governor David Ige**  
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**Dan Baer**  
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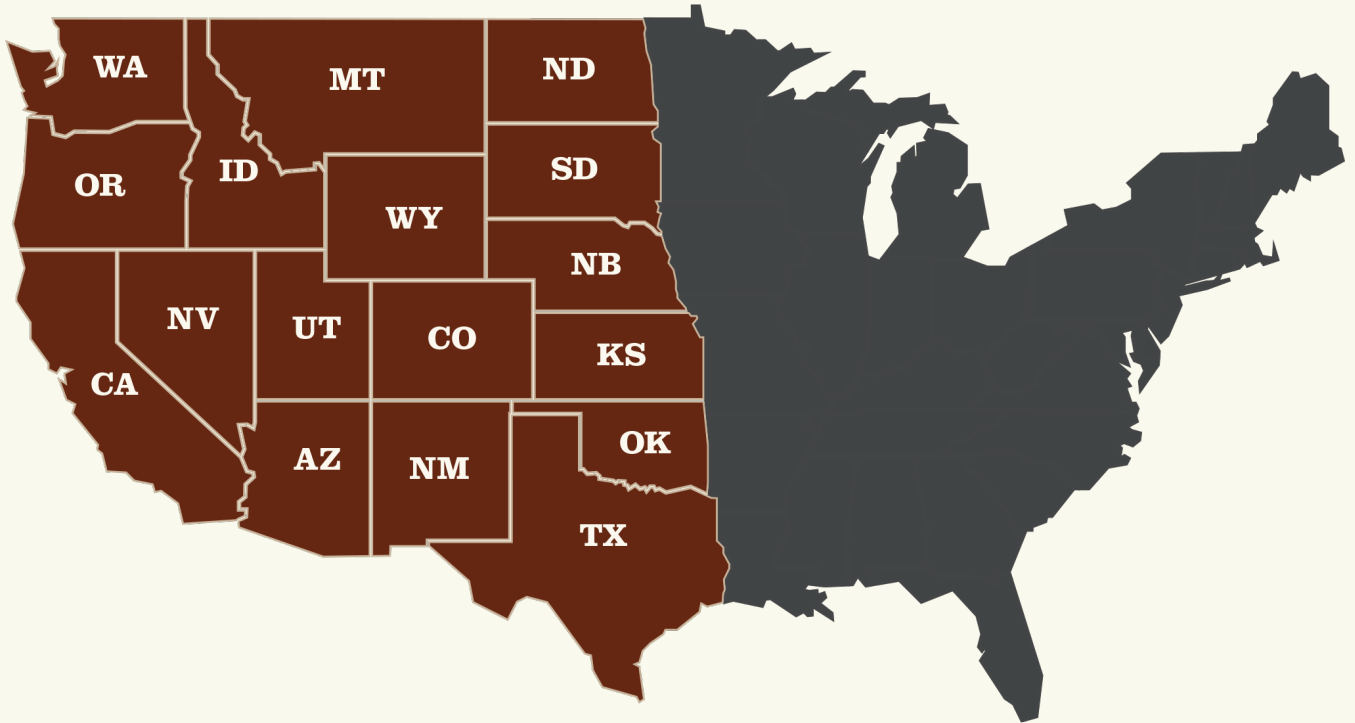
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