NATURAL RESOURCES AND HUMAN FLOURISHING:

Toward a More Abundant Future

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NATURAL RESOURCES MAKE HUMAN LIFE BETTER

America is home to abundant natural resources, including energy resources, minerals, timber, and grazing lands. Throughout America's history, people have harnessed these resources to make life better. Frontier Americans used timber to build homes to protect themselves from the elements. Later Americans extracted oil to produce fuel for their cars and electricity to light their homes. And generations of farmers and ranchers have stewarded the country's vast grasslands to provide agricultural products from cattle to corn.

The development of natural resources for productive use has been integral to American progress. Today, Americans take for granted that flipping a light switch will turn the lights on to allow their children to do homework, that their home heating fuel will last through a winter storm, and that hospital incubators will be operational and available nearby to improve the chances that premature babies survive.

Life was more difficult for previous generations. Thanks to their hard work and tireless innovation, Americans today have harnessed the natural world to make life better, safer, and longer.

But continued progress is not inevitable. In fact, in recent decades the US government has severely restricted Americans' ability to access and harness natural resources for human benefit. Today, an overlapping web of federal and state policies makes it increasingly difficult—and often impossible—to develop American natural resources. Laws such as the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the Clean Water Act (CWA), the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and the Antiquities Act—along with their state analogs—create massive barriers to developing the natural resources needed to power everyday life.

Limiting access to natural resources results in real human costs that cannot be ignored. Continuing down the path of scarcity rather than abundance will sacrifice gains in future prosperity, a higher standard of living, innovation that could tackle pressing problems, and the ability to build the basic infrastructure that individuals need to live and to thrive. Policymakers must acknowledge these costs and enact meaningful reforms that will allow Americans to build again.

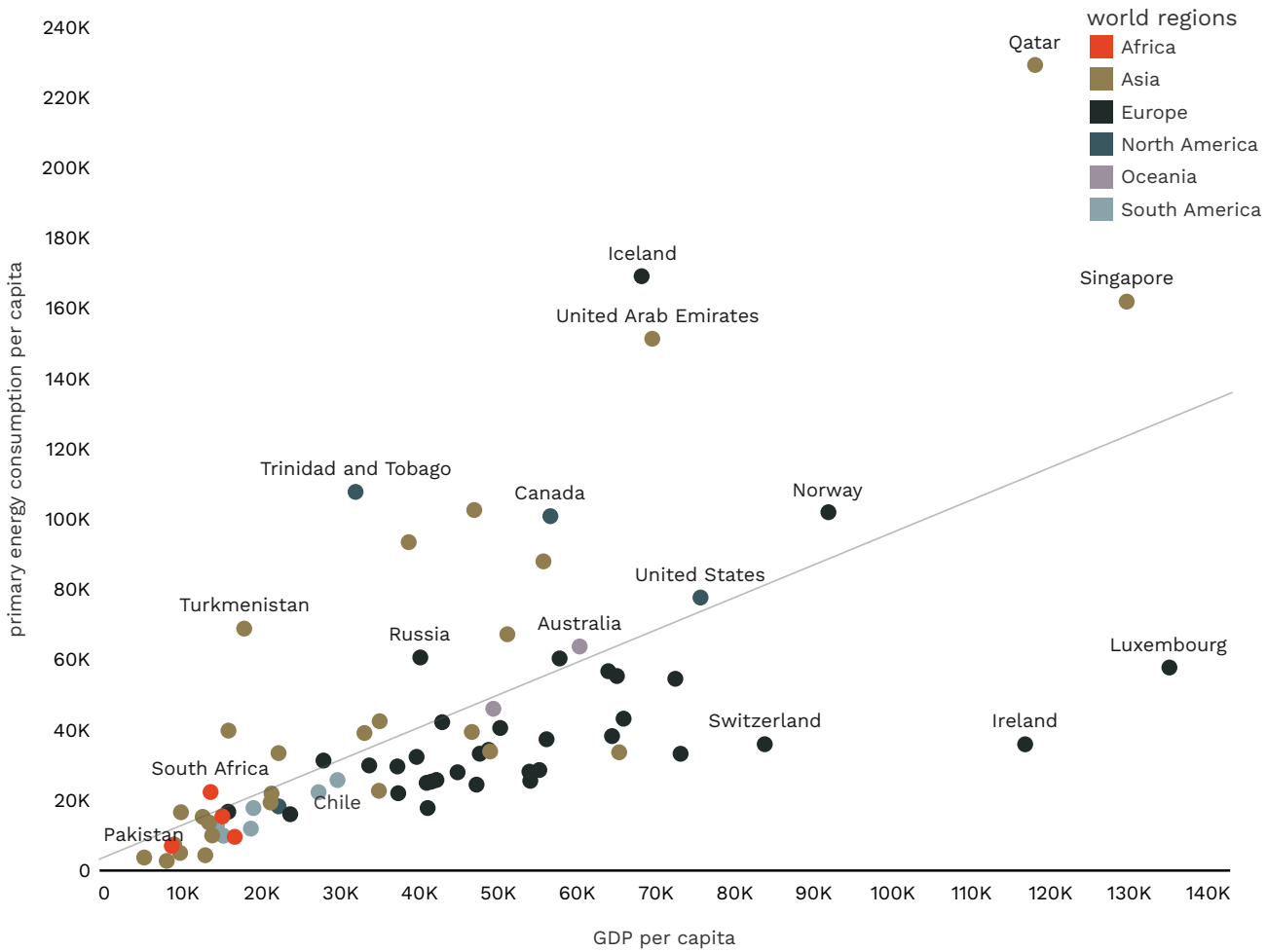
This research in brief will review the well-documented connection between natural resource use and human prosperity. It will then review the vast natural resources that America is home to. Finally, it will examine the largest public policy barriers to the productive use of natural resources in America, including NEPA, the ESA, the CWA, and the management of federal lands. It will conclude with a call to action for America to change its trajectory from one of stagnation to one of human flourishing.

NATURAL RESOURCES ARE KEY TO PROSPERITY

Energy serves as the backbone of the economy, allowing every other sector to produce goods and services Americans need. Energy heats homes in the winter, cools them in the summer, and allows people to travel across the country and the world. Existing research shows a clear connection between energy use and per capita GDP, a common measure of human prosperity. As a country's ability to produce and use energy increases, per capita GDP increases. Figure 1 demonstrates the connection between per capita GDP and per capita energy use over time.

The need for natural resources does not stop with energy. From housing to electronics, all everyday goods and services rely on natural resources. For example, producing a single iPhone requires miners to extract 46 elements, processors to refine those elements, and manufacturers to shape those 46 elements into specific parts that Apple suppliers then assemble into the final product.[1] Apple has these minerals mined from all over the world, but many of these minerals occur in meaningful quantities in the United States as well.

Figure 1. Per Capita GDP and Per Capita Energy Consumption Across Countries (2023)



Source: "Energy Use Per Person vs. GDP Per Capita, 2023," Our World in Data, accessed June 20, 2025, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/energy-use-per-person-vs-gdp-per-capita?time=2023.

AMERICA CONTAINS VAST NATURAL RESOURCES

America boasts a wealth of natural resources—across public and private lands—that could fuel prosperity if they were unleashed for productive use. The federal government owns about 30 percent of the total land in the United States.[2] Because the federal government controls such a large portion of America's land, accessing and producing natural resources on those lands depend on federal land management policies.

Federal law also mandates that the government put much of these lands to productive use. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) mandates that public lands be managed according to multiple use and sustained yield and "in a manner which recognizes the Nation's need for domestic sources of minerals, food, timber, and fiber."[3]

Even on private lands, federal laws and regulations govern whether and how resources can be accessed. Tapping these resources is often easier said than done.

Energy

The United States contains vast amounts of energy resources, including coal, natural gas, oil shale, tar sands, and renewable energy such as wind, solar, and geothermal. Since 2019, total US energy production has exceeded consumption. In 2023, fossil fuels made up 84 percent of energy production, while renewables and nuclear each made up 8 percent.[4]

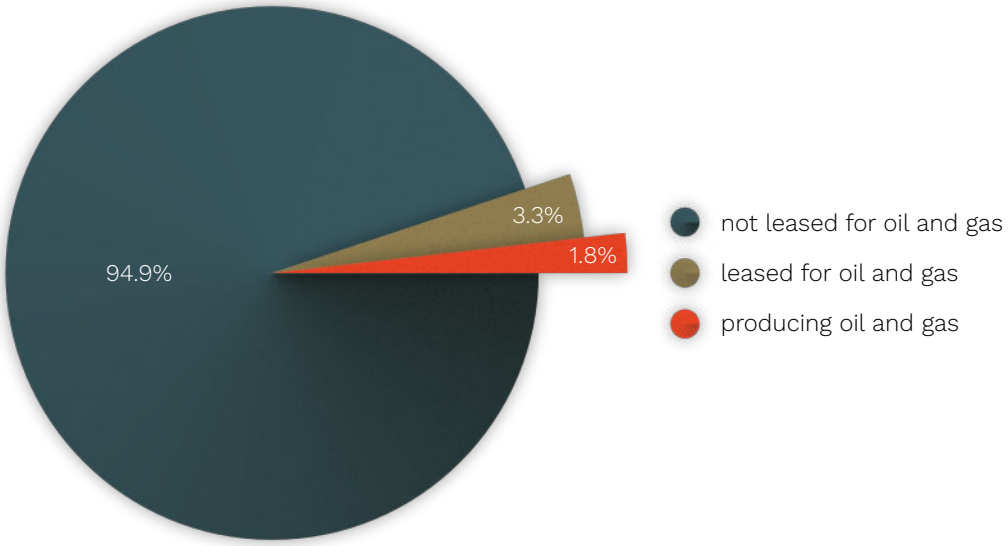
Public lands make up 30 percent of America's total land area and contain significant energy resources. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages the federal government's mineral estate "for the benefit of the American public" in accordance with the FLPMA. In 2022, energy leases on federal lands accounted for 11 percent of oil and 9 percent of gas production in the United States.[5] As of January 2025, the BLM permitted 37 gigawatts of combined power in renewable energy projects on federal lands—enough to power 16.6 million homes. These include geothermal, solar, wind, and transmission connection projects.[6]

Of the 700 million acres owned by the federal government, 23 million (3.3 percent) were leased to oil and gas developers in 2022. Only 12.4 million acres (1.8 percent) produced significant amounts of oil and gas.[7] Figure 2 shows how much of the federal estate is used for oil and gas production and shows that there is significant potential to increase the amount of land that is leased for productive use.

Timber

Timber ranks among the most abundant resources in the United States. The United States contains 7.5 percent of the world's total forests. Private landowners manage about 60 percent of US forests, whereas the federal government oversees 30 percent, and state and local governments manage the remaining 10 percent.[8] The Forest Service and the BLM manage most of the federally owned forests. Both agencies are tasked with managing forests according to a

Figure 2. Federal Lands Used for Oil and Gas



Source: "About the BLM Oil and Gas Program," Bureau of Land Management, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.blm.gov/programs/energy-and-minerals/oil-and-gas/about.

multiple-use and sustained-yield mandate, which includes selling timber for harvesting.[9]

The Forest Service reports that forests cover 73 percent of the 191 million acres it manages, but it permits regular timber harvesting on only 35 percent of that land. Each year, timber operations harvest just 0.5 percent of the trees on that accessible land. The Forest Service prohibits harvesting on the remaining acres (124 million acres), keeping them off-limits to timber production.[10] A report by the Government Accountability Office finds that the Forest Service failed to meet its target for timber sales in any year from 2014 to 2023.[11]

Mining and Minerals

In addition to energy, the United States also produces minerals for use in construction, electronics, and manufacturing. Copper, gold, construction sand and gravel, cement, and crushed stone make up the top five minerals by production value. In 2024, US producers mined nonfuel minerals worth $106 billion. They generated $33.5 billion from metals and $72.1 billion from industrial minerals.[12]

The United States also holds critical minerals: minerals that the Energy Act of 2020 defines as essential to economic and national security.[13] The United States Geological Survey published a list of 50 critical minerals in 2022 and estimated that domestic production of critical minerals had a value of $3.3 billion in 2024. The agency estimated that the United States relied entirely on imports for 12 of the 50 critical minerals and depended on imports for over 50 percent of 28 others. Multiple federal and state initiatives are currently underway to more accurately map the inventory of critical minerals in the United States and boost domestic production.[14] The National Mining Association has urged lawmakers to reform regulations to open new mines and expand production at existing ones.[15]

Grazing

Ranchers use America's natural resources productively by grazing livestock on private and public lands. Grazing on public lands has a long history in the United States. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 created grazing districts and a framework of regulation to prevent overgrazing.[16] In 2017, ranchers used 805 million acres, or 35.6 percent of total US land, for grazing.[17] The BLM oversees livestock grazing on 155 million acres of public lands by issuing permits to ranchers that generally last for 10 years. The National Park Service also manages some of its land for grazing.[18]

The American Farm Bureau Federation estimates that about $1 billion in livestock sales results from grazing on public lands.[19] Although the BLM has seen some small increase in livestock grazing in recent years, the overall trend has been one of decline. From 1954 to 2016, the number of grazing units on BLM land declined by 52 percent.[20] The Congressional Research Service attributes this change to changing land use plans and resource protection needs, among other factors like development and deteriorating range conditions in the West.[21]

POLICY BARRIERS HINDER HUMAN FLOURISHING

With such vast resources available, why does the United States not produce more of the energy, minerals, and other raw materials that are the backbone of human flourishing? Since the 1970s, an overlapping web of environmental laws and regulations has increasingly choked off the productive use of natural resources in America. This regulatory thicket developed not by chance but by the conscious decisions of legislators, bureaucrats, and judges. These decisions have moved America away from growth, prosperity, and abundance and toward a path of scarcity. However, it is not too late to reverse course.

This section outlines the key federal policies that limit Americans' ability to harness raw materials for a future of human flourishing. These policies include NEPA, the ESA, the CWA, and the Antiquities Act.

National Environmental Policy Act

Under NEPA, federal agencies must evaluate the impacts of any major federal actions that will have a significant effect on the environment. This evaluation may take the form of an environmental assessment (EA) or a more involved environmental impact statement (EIS).[22] Unlike the other laws, NEPA is primarily procedural: It does not set environmental standards, but it does establish a lengthy permitting process that projects must follow before they can break ground.[23]

According to the Council on Environmental Quality, the average time to complete an EIS is 4.5 years.[24] The American Action Forum finds that it takes an average of 70 months (nearly 6 years) for an infrastructure project to complete the NEPA review process.[25] These delays have real costs. In 2017, the US Department of Energy estimated the cost of preparing an EA was $313,000, and the cost of preparing an EIS was over $6 million.[26]

These costs and delays deter investment, delay projects, and drive up costs for American consumers. As a remedy, Congress amended NEPA in 2023 via the Building United States Infrastructure through Limited Delays and Efficient Reviews Act of 2023 (BUILDER Act).[27] This BUILDER Act provides that an EIS "shall not exceed 150 pages" and must be completed in "2 years" or less.[28]

Endangered Species Act

The ESA protects species and their habitats with the goal of preventing them from going extinct. In practice, the ESA can have the opposite effect. If an endangered species is found on private land, the restrictions associated with the ESA incentivize landowners to make their land less hospitable to that species.[29] Landowners may harm a protected species to avoid losing their ability to use their land productively. By this phenomenon, known as "shoot, shovel, and shut up," landowners may even kill endangered species on their land, cover up the evidence, and avoid telling government officials for fear of retribution or restrictions to their livelihood.[30] Moreover, species listed as endangered rarely recover—only about 2 percent of all species listed have ever been delisted owing to recovery.[31] In other words, the law has failed to deliver the results Congress promised.

In 1978, the Supreme Court ruled that Congress intended for species to be saved "whatever the cost," which gave wide spending latitude to agencies.[32] Since then, annual spending on endangered species and their habitats has been $1.2 billion, according to a 2020 estimate by the director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.[33] The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates the average cost of listing a species and designating critical habitat to be $305,000 per species.[34]

These costs do not include the costs borne by private parties in attempting to comply with the ESA or the cost of lawsuits brought to stop projects from moving forward. They also do not account for the lost value of projects that would have moved forward if not for the legal and financial barriers created by the ESA.

Clean Water Act

The CWA tasks the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with preventing, reducing, and eliminating pollution in the navigable waters of the United States. The CWA is one of the most heavy-handed environmental laws. It requires that landowners identify whether they have regulated water on their property, even though the definition of "waters of the United States" has changed many times since the CWA's passage.

In the 2022 case *Sackett v. EPA*, the Supreme Court limited regulated waters to permanent bodies of water with a continuous surface connection to navigable waters. Despite this finding, many landowners whose property does not meet this definition find themselves in the crosshairs of overzealous federal agencies.[35] Moreover, the stakes are high—those who fail to comply with the unclear requirements of the CWA may face fines of up to $66,000 per day in addition to jail time.[36]

Researchers estimate the average cost of obtaining a CWA permit at $270,000 in 2002.[37] When adjusted for inflation, that entails a per-project cost of $480,000 in 2025. These costs are on top of the average of 10 years it takes to complete the permitting process.[38] The CWA's costs, delays, and regulatory uncertainty keep valuable projects from ever getting off the ground.

Antiquities Act

The Antiquities Act was passed to allow the president to protect Native American artifacts and "objects of historic or scientific interest" from destruction by designating federal land as a national monument. The law requires the president to designate the "smallest area compatible" with the protection of these objects. Over time, presidents have increasingly ignored the law's plain language by designating national monuments that protect entire ecosystems and stretch over millions of acres.[39]

These designations are often driven by political interest groups lobbying to prevent productive projects from occurring on federal lands. For example, in 2023, President Joseph R. Biden Jr. designated over 900,000 acres as Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument, permanently locking away uranium deposits that could help provide energy.[40] Landscape-scale national monument designations interfere with Americans' ability to use public lands as intended by limiting activities like grazing, logging, and extraction.

A MORE ABUNDANT FUTURE IS POSSIBLE

Throughout history, humankind has harnessed natural resources to improve well-being. Through innovation and hard work, American settlers built new cities to house future generations. American inventors found a way to turn rocks in the ground into electricity to power homes, hospitals, and schools. All of this created a world vastly richer and safer than our ancestors could have imagined. These life-improving innovations would not have been possible without the freedom to use natural resources.

Today, Americans have a choice: continue restricting access to America's vast natural resources, leading to stagnation and higher costs of living, or embrace abundance and the free use of natural resources, leading to growth and prosperity. Allowing America to build a more prosperous future will require bold action to remove the barriers that stand in the way of the productive use of America's vast natural resources.

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