NO PREP

Land Use and Federal vs. State Power

Who Controls Natural Resources?

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key



Name: Period: Date:

Land Use and Federal vs. State Power: Who Controls Natural Resources?

Students examine conflicts between federal and state governments over land management, national parks, and energy resources. They debate issues like oil drilling, logging, and Indigenous land rights.

Historical Context of Land Management

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Historical Context of Land Management

Debates over who should control public lands stretch back to America's founding, rooted in competing visions of how to balance resource exploitation with conservation. The federal government manages millions of acres under agencies like the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Forest Service, and the National Park Service. States, particularly in the West, often argue they know best how to administer local territories, pointing to economic benefits such as mining, logging, and energy extraction. Supporters of federal oversight counter that these lands belong to all Americans, not just residents of one state. Over time, disputes flared over grazing rights, water access, and potential damage to fragile ecosystems. The creation of national parks in the late 19th and early 20th centuries added another dimension, prioritizing conservation and public enjoyment. Meanwhile, tensions persist regarding which government entity holds final authority over permitting and revenue distribution from resource extraction on public lands.

Energy Development and Environmental Concerns

Land use often pivots on the push to develop energy resources, such as coal, oil, natural gas, and renewables like solar or wind. Federal lands contain extensive fossil fuel deposits, fueling arguments about whether drilling leases and mining permits should be expanded or curtailed. Advocates stress economic growth, job creation, and energy independence. Opponents warn that such development risks

environmental degradation, from wildlife habitat disruption to water contamination. Agencies face the challenge of drafting environmental impact statements, assessing whether proposed projects meet legal and ecological standards. In some cases, state governments encourage development for tax revenue and local employment, clashing with federal agencies that might impose stricter regulations to protect national interests. Moreover, climate change pressures policy decisions, raising questions about whether more fossil fuel extraction aligns with broader national or global goals for reducing carbon emissions. This complex web of laws, permits, and political influences makes energy development on public lands a key battleground in federal-state relations.

Indigenous Land Rights and Sovereignty

Any discussion of land use in the United States must also address Indigenous sovereignty. Tribal nations entered treaties with the federal government that often reserved certain rights to land and resources. These agreements continue to shape policy, giving tribes leverage to protect sacred sites, water resources, and hunting grounds. While some energy projects promise economic benefits for tribes through royalty agreements, they may also threaten traditional ways of life and cultural heritage. Court cases over pipeline routes or mining on ancestral lands highlight the complexities of balancing development with treaty obligations. Federal agencies have a trust responsibility to consult with tribal governments on projects affecting their lands. However, critics argue consultation processes can be superficial, leading to decisions that do not reflect tribal concerns. On the flip side, states sometimes have limited authority in these disputes, as tribal rights are often shielded by federal law. Thus, land use debates involving Indigenous communities add a critical layer of history, legal obligations, and moral considerations often overshadowed in simpler federal-state conflicts.

Paths to Collaboration and Future Outlook

Despite these tensions, collaborative models exist. Some states have entered co-management agreements with federal agencies, blending local expertise with national standards. Similarly, tribal nations have developed resource-management plans that incorporate traditional ecological knowledge, often producing more sustainable practices. Pilot programs show that stakeholder engagement—bringing together ranchers, environmentalists, state officials, tribal leaders, and federal agencies—

can yield balanced approaches. The future likely hinges on negotiations that reconcile economic interests with environmental preservation, as well as the recognition that climate change affects all levels of government. Innovative policies, such as carbon offset programs or habitat conservation plans, can bridge gaps among competing interests. While federal law generally has supremacy, local perspectives and tribal treaties play vital roles in shaping on-the-ground outcomes. The multifaceted nature of land management ensures that no single solution fits every region. The path forward involves constant dialogue, updated legal frameworks, and a willingness to respect diverse voices that have a stake in America's public lands.

Key Information: Table: Factors Influencing Land Use Decisions

Factor	Description
Economic Benefits	Job creation, revenue, energy independence
Environmental Risks	Habitat destruction, pollution, climate impact
Indigenous Rights	Treaty obligations, cultural significance
Legal Frameworks	Federal vs. state authority, court rulings

Case Study Excerpt (Oil Drilling Debate in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge)

Controversy over drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) exemplifies the complexity of land use disputes. Proponents, including some state officials, argue that developing the refuge's oil reserves could bolster Alaska's economy, create jobs, and reduce reliance on foreign oil. Opponents point to the region's fragile tundra ecosystem, the habitat for caribou herds, polar bears, and migratory birds, and the cultural importance of the area to Indigenous peoples. Federal agencies have conducted multiple environmental assessments, with varying conclusions about the potential impact of drilling on wildlife and climate. Meanwhile, certain tribal nations who depend on caribou for subsistence worry about disruptions to migration patterns. Litigation has frequently stalled lease sales. Each new administration reviews or reverses prior policy decisions, reflecting changing priorities in Washington, D.C. The ANWR case highlights how state, federal, and Indigenous interests can collide, forcing courts and agencies to repeatedly weigh economic gains against the long-term health of delicate environments.

1. What are two reasons proponents give for supporting oil drilling in ANWR?

_____

_____

2. How do Indigenous groups justify their opposition to drilling in this area?

_____

_____

Multiple Choice

1. One argument for allowing states more control over public lands is that:

    a) The federal government earns all local tax revenue

    b) States always have stricter environmental standards

    c) States might better understand local economic needs

    d) The Constitution bans federal land ownership

2. A major concern for Indigenous communities regarding land development is:

    a) An oversupply of housing

    b) The risk of losing treaty rights and sacred sites

    c) The complete elimination of all fishing activities

    d) Access to lavish vacation resorts

3. A co-management agreement usually involves:

    a) State, federal, and tribal entities sharing oversight responsibilities

    b) Federal agencies ceasing all regulation

    c) Selling all public lands to private developers

    d) Only private companies setting resource policies on land that they own

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ (1) BLM	A) Rights and self-governance retained by tribal nations
2. ___ (2) ANWR	B) Joint oversight by federal, state, and tribal entities
3. ___ (3) Co-management	C) Federal agency that oversees public lands
4. ___ (4) Indigenous Sovereignty	D) Subsistence hunting is central to cultural traditions
5. ___ (5) Caribou	E) Land area in Alaska facing controversy over oil drilling

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. _____ knowledge refers to the expertise Indigenous communities have in sustainably managing their lands over generations.

2. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is an example of a _____ land area, overseen by federal agencies.

3. Federal law typically has _____ over state regulations in cases of conflict.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why might local communities support energy development on federal lands despite environmental concerns?

_____

_____

_____

2. What are some potential benefits of involving Indigenous knowledge in land management decisions?

3. How does climate change factor into disputes over fossil fuel extraction on public lands?