

Nevada is 82.9% federally-managed land

By Larry Hyslop



Most of this Nevada map shows federal management

Much is made of this figure of 82.9%. Some like this figure since it offers people a chance to get out and enjoy solitude. Others curse it as stifling our economy. How did this come about?

Jim Lawrence is the Administrator for the Division of State Lands in Carson City. He said Nevada was a very young and undeveloped when we became a territory in 1861 and a state in 1864. The state's population was only 30,000, most of which lived in the northwest part of the state. The rest of the state had barely been explored. Most of the state had not been claimed as private land, but was considered unappropriated public domain.

As we became a state, Congress's document "ACT OF CONGRESS (1864) ENABLING THE PEOPLE OF NEVADA TO FORM A CONSTITUTION AND STATE GOVERNMENT" said "... the people inhabiting said territory do agree and declare that they forever disclaim all right and title to the unappropriated public lands lying within said territory." The state's constitution echoed this wording, as did most other western states. As a sign of the times in 1864, this document also stated "That there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said state..."

None of this was controversial at the time. Most of Nevada's land was viewed as having little or no worth. Not so today, as controversy rages. People say this language was not in the statehood documents for the original 13 colonies and should not be used for later states. Texas did not use this language and today, has very little federally managed lands.

Other factors complicated Nevada's mix of federal and private lands. Nevada qualified for land grants, including receiving two sections of each township to support public schools. But these sections were far off, on land having little value and few people. In 1880, the Exchange Act allowed Nevada to exchange 3.9 million acres of land for better valued river bottoms, but Nevada gave up half of the school lands. Almost all of these acres were later sold to private owners, leaving almost nothing to help support schools. Utah took a different tactic with Congress, saying their school sections also had little value so they needed more land. They received four sections per township, which today helps pay for much of their school system.

When the Central Pacific Railroad was built across Nevada in 1869, they were awarded every other section of land in a swath 20 miles both sides of the railroad tracks. In other states, early railroads sold

most all of their lands, but not in Nevada. Of the five million acres once owned by the railroad in this checkerboard, they still owned 3.5 million acres in 1985, according to a document "NEVADA SUMMARY POLICY PLAN FOR PUBLIC LANDS". The Southern Pacific Railroad has sold most of their lands to holding companies and it gets a little sketchy as to who owns what.

New Nevada Lands Company is trying to sell 480,000 acres of private land in the checkerboard. These 913 parcels are a tough sell. They are arid, with difficult soils and terrains. In Nevada, properties only one square mile in size, whether private or public, are difficult to manage. They are also difficult to access. The checkerboard creates many headaches for the BLM and private land owners.

Elko County is 71.5% federal land and 26.7% state/private. This state/private percentage is the fourth largest for a Nevada county, according to this 1985 document.

Elko Daily Free Press, "Nature Notes", 3/30/2013

© Gray Jay Press, Elko, NV

Return to [Elko Nature Notes](#)