From towering mountains to arid deserts, from verdant forests to wide open fields, America’s wild lands are part of God’s creation. Just as it was for the ancient Israelites, land is more than real estate or dirt under our feet. While land includes the gifts of soil, air, and water for food and shelter, it is also the foundation of human community — where we live, work, play, and find spiritual renewal.

Public lands are the areas we already know and love: state and national parks, wilderness areas, national forests, scenic trails, national monuments, wildlife refuges, national recreation areas, and more. Many of us were raised singing Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land,” and Katharine Lee Bates’ “America the Beautiful.” The intrinsic value and beauty of our nation’s natural spaces have long been a matter of American pride and identity.

Our understanding of land as a gift, a trust, and a reflection of God’s grace should compel us to action. We must actively address those issues that threaten the health and viability of God’s land, and speak out for justice while caring for the common good.

Wild lands connect us with our religious heritage

Many important biblical stories involve wilderness, including those of Moses, Abraham and Sarah, and Jesus. The meaning of these stories can be enhanced by our own experiences in the wilderness. Wild lands can be a place of Sabbath rest from our trials and labors. They provide space in which to become more aware of God’s presence. There, we like Elijah may hear the still small voice of God (I Kings 19).

We are called to be faithful stewards of all creation

Some public lands are intended for us to enjoy, such as viewing natural wonders in national parks and monuments, hiking and camping in national forests, or rafting on a Wild and Scenic river. Yet in Leviticus 25:23-24, God reminds the community that the Earth’s lands belong to God. We are only tenants here, and the lands that we use are to be protected even as they provide us with recreation and spiritual nourishment.

Good stewardship is good economics

The same wild lands that fill our spiritual well bring prosperity to our communities. Significant recreational opportunities abound on public lands, which are important to local residents and to the economic vitality of nearby regions. Employers depend on highly-skilled, healthy, motivated employees—the very people drawn to a lifestyle that includes access to hiking, fishing, hunting, skiing, climbing, boating and other forms of recreation found on our public lands.
Support the Antiquities Act of 1906
The Antiquities Act of 1906 allows the President to designate federal lands which contain objects of historic, scientific, or scenic significance as a national monument in order to prevent damage from commercial and other development.

Sixteen U.S. Presidents have declared over 140 national monuments under the Act – eight Republican Presidents and eight Democratic Presidents – modeling a bipartisan approach to protecting America’s most sacred places. Areas that have been protected through the Antiquities Act include Mount St. Helens, Mount Olympus, Hanford Reach, and the San Juan Islands in Washington State.

Congress has also shown leadership in declaring 40 national monuments under the Act – eight Republican Presidents and eight Democratic Presidents – modeling a bipartisan approach to protecting America’s most sacred places. Areas that have been protected through the Antiquities Act include Mount St. Helens, Mount Olympus, Hanford Reach, and the San Juan Islands in Washington State.

Congress has also shown leadership in declaring 40 national monuments, and has re-designated 32 national monuments as national parks. Yet in recent years, numerous bills to weaken the Antiquities Act have been introduced in Congress. These attacks are inconsistent with conservation values that Americans hold dear and hurt economic prosperity.

What you can do:
1. Contact US Senators Patty Murray (202-224-2621) and Maria Cantwell (202-224-3441) and your US Representative (find him/her at www.house.gov) and ask them to oppose any amendment to the Antiquities Act that would curtail Presidential authority to designate national monuments.

2. Encourage these elected leaders to support full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund at the $900 million level for Fiscal Year 2015.

Protect the Land and Water Conservation Fund
In 1964, Congress made a commitment to the American public that a small portion of revenues from offshore oil and gas drilling would go to outdoor recreation and conservation across the nation, as an offset for the depletion of resources that belong to us all. Yet, year after year, Congress diverts most of these funds for purposes unrelated to conservation.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund is essential for our quality of life. The fund has invested approximately $530 million in Washington over the last 40 years to expand public access to lakes and streams; build sports fields, trails, and local parks; conserve working forests; and protect state icons like Mount Rainier, the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area, and the Yakima River watershed.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund supports 227,000 jobs and generates $22.5 billion from the outdoor recreation sector in our state. Without the fund, projects such as maintaining the Pacific Crest Trail and providing water access in places like Lake Sammamish and Lake Entiat will go unfunded. Our faith calls us to ensure that Congress includes full funding of $900 million for this important program in the 2015 federal budget, and that the funds are used for conservation projects.

It has been well documented that monuments support nearby communities by attracting tourism dollars and creating jobs. According to a report by Headwaters Economics, the local economies surrounding 17 national monuments grew following the monument’s designation, as did per capita income. Tourism is now a major contributor to these and other communities near national monuments, providing good jobs and increasing prosperity across all sectors. As people of faith, we must speak up to preserve current and future Presidents’ ability to protect our precious lands for future generations.