

WESTERN GOVERNORS
2024 Winter Meetings – Las Vegas**December 13, 2024**
Special Report #2639

On December 9-10, the Western Governors Association (WGA) held its Winter Meetings in Las Vegas, Nevada. Executive Director Jack Waldorf welcomed those attending, before introducing each participating governor, including: Governors Michelle Lujan Grisham (D-NM), WGA Chair; Spencer Cox (R-UT), Vice-Chair; Jared Polis (D-CO); Josh Green (D-HI); Brad Little (R-ID); Joe Lombardo (R-NV); and Mark Gordon (R-WY). Also attending were Canadian Premier Danielle Smith, Alberta, and Premier RJ Simpson, Northwest Territories. Waldorf noted western governors are addressing some of the most pressing challenges facing this and future generations, and may disagree regarding policy choices, but without being disagreeable. He emphasized WGA's pride in its bipartisan ethos, stating "collective voices echo louder."

Governor Lujan Grisham declared, "This organization operates in what I would argue isn't really bipartisan anymore, it's nonpartisan. We are having constructive conversations with experts from across the country, engaging both public and private sector individuals and organizations. We ask tough questions and work together to find meaningful solutions to these problems."

Governor Lujan Grisham noted that each state is unique but the friendship among the governors helps drive policy innovation. She also expressed the governors' ability to work with whatever Administration, and the importance of that relationship as the federal government and sovereign tribal nations own millions of acres of land in western states. Her specific initiative as Chair is Building Resilient and Affordable New Developments (BRAND) in the West. A panel on Land for Community Housing Needs focused on strategies to expand access to housing and the potential to leverage certain federal lands for critical housing supply development.

Another panel addressed Insuring Homes Against the Wildfire Crisis. Heightened wildfire and other natural disasters have contributed to a most challenging home insurance market, with many areas of the West facing unaffordable or even unavailable coverage. Insurers are struggling to balance reasonably priced offerings and risk management. Karen Collins, American Property Casualty Insurance Association, showed a slide illustrating the declining levels of Lake Mead, and likened it to insurance companies attempting to maintain capital in the face of increasing payouts. Governor Green warmly highlighted what he described as the inequitable treatment of many residents that lost their homes in the Lahaina fire on Maui with only a fraction of past insurance premiums paid out for the damages. Fire resistant building materials and "defensible space" can minimize losses, but Governor Polis added that the expense isn't necessarily reflected in reduced insurance rates. In fact, higher property values increase rates.

Governor Gordon led a panel on Smarter, Faster Permitting. Permitting challenges persist in many sectors and improving processes for critical projects through enhanced coordination across all levels of government can speed approval while providing for meaningful public input and protecting human health and the environment. He observed that when you can't get a permit for a project in a reasonable period of time the public loses confidence in the process. He stated that current permitting delays and resulting costs are unacceptable. Permitting should not be used as a weapon or a barrier to progress. He suggested that if the federal government can't do the job, then perhaps they should defer to the States.

Jeremy Harrell, CEO, ClearPath (an energy innovation organization), described growing demands across the West for affordable and reliable energy, specifically referring to artificial intelligence and data centers. Some 100 gigawatts of energy are "in the queue," including transmission lines and pipelines. Regional core policy changes are needed to speed the permitting process and not just incremental changes "around the edges." The average period of time to complete a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is 4.5 years. Legal challenges can add another 3.9 years on average. Some 42% of active U.S. Department of Energy NEPA reviews are for clean energy, conservation and transmission projects. This does not take into account state and local permitting requirements.

Joel Pedersen, CEO, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP), which represents 63 non-governmental organizations, declared "green tape" results in delays for conservation projects too. The NEPA and state reviews should not require a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Many conservation organizations are struggling to get federal funding "out the door" for projects with environmental benefits. Moreover, some work may temporarily impact the environment negatively, but lead to long-term environmental benefits. TRCP supports piloting a categorical exclusion (CE) under NEPA December 13, 2024 for longstanding restoration practices for wetlands, forest and streams where we know the impacts.

Special guest speakers included Xavier Becerra, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Steve Inskeep, a National Public Radio host and author of the book, *Differ We Must: How Lincoln Succeeded in a Divided America*. Governor Green welcomed the Secretary and praised him for the response in Lahaina and as Hawaii weathered Covid. Asked what HHS might need from the States, Becerra emphasized sharing health data, noting that with the exception of Covid, the federal government relies on States for data.

Inskeep said that as he was flying into Las Vegas, he was struck by Lake Mead's low water levels and the sprawling neighborhoods, putting a face on urban growth and Colorado River issues. He talked about the lost value of disappearing institutions, and said political battles are often mediated through our institutions. He added that the new Administration and the Congress may not necessarily be on the same page despite being politically aligned. He is keeping an open mind related to what is really going to happen. While we are encouraged by social media to reject and isolate those we don't agree with, everyone still has a vote. What can we do different from social media or opinion pieces?

Inskeep stated that his study of Abraham Lincoln has shown insights about politics, and what to do when "differ we must." Lincoln found ways to work with slave owners and corrupt politicians he did not agree with. As one example, Inskeep noted that Lincoln and a friend, Joshua Speed, came from very different backgrounds. The Speed family farm had some 50 slaves, but Joshua was increasingly aware slavery was wrong. Lincoln upbraided Speed in an 1855 letter, essentially asking, "What are you doing about it?" Lincoln assumed everyone was acting out of their own self-interest, but he also talked about the importance of a "moral sense." While they strongly disagreed, he gave others room to develop their own moral sense over time. He closed his letter, "Your friend forever." Later, Speed was instrumental in keeping Kentucky in the Union. Finally, Inskeep said that while the media tends to present issues simply as black or white, there is great political value in ambiguity. Lincoln wasn't always clear about his positions. He called questions related to the future role of freed slaves a "pernicious abstraction," and remained otherwise silent on the issue. Silence can sometimes be the best response. Inskeep noted, "As a citizen, sometimes I'm frustrated because things are so complex... We need to be more patient."

The governors approved five bipartisan policy resolutions focused on air quality, compensatory mitigation, energy, health care, and workforce development. See westgov.org/resolutions.