

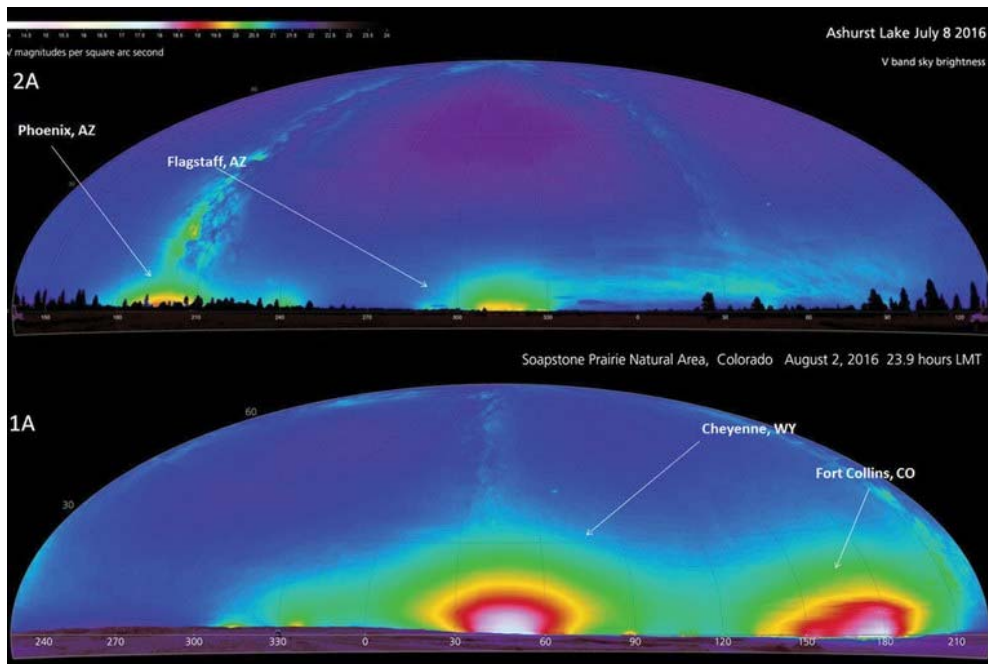
High Country News

for people who care about the West

Clearer skies; Western govts court Pruitt; Clean Water Rule too far?

HCN.org news in brief.

[Staff](#) March 20, 2017 From the [print edition](#)



Data mosaics show brightness and artificial light measurements taken from Ashurst Lake in Arizona's Coconino National Forest and northeastern Colorado's Soapstone Prairie Natural Area.

National Park Service

CHASING CLEAR SKIES

In some less-populated places, the Milky Way's glow can be seen on any clear night. But for many of us, seeing the splendors of the night sky means traveling far outside city limits to a place away from streetlights and other artificial illumination. Now, many national parks and Western cities are making an effort to limit light pollution. "Everything has its time and place, and the same is true of light and darkness," astronomy author Bob Berman recently told NBC. "There is a place for darkness, and, I think that is slowly being realized."

-Jodi Peterson

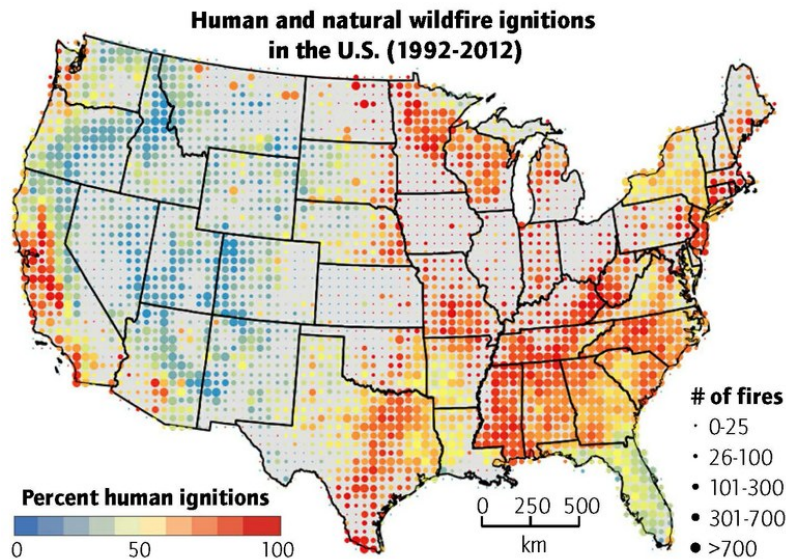
CAN WESTERN GOVERNORS GET WHAT THEY WANT FROM SCOTT PRUITT?



[EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt.](#)

Just a few days in office, Scott Pruitt, the new administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, hosted an early Sunday morning breakfast for 11 Western governors. He told them that, under his leadership, the EPA will defer to states far more than it has in the past. That message resonated with the Western governors, across political lines. Western governors from both parties felt the Obama administration's EPA failed to adequately consult the states as it crafted some important environmental regulations, such as the 2015 Clean Water Rule. "We believe (Pruitt's EPA) will partner with states in a way that's meaningful," says Nephi Cole, Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead's policy advisor, "in a way that, quite frankly, the previous administration did not." While the Western governors break out of the hyper-partisanship and see a partner in Pruitt, potential major budget cuts to the EPA may give Pruitt less leeway to respond to state needs.

-Elizabeth Shogren



[Bethany Bradley/University of Massachusetts Amherst](#)

[WE DID START THE FIRE](#)

By studying Forest Service records, University of Colorado-Boulder researchers found that 84 percent of the 1.5 million wildfires that burned nationally from 1992 to 2012 were lit by humans, not including controlled burns intentionally lit for fire management. In total, humans started more than 1.2 million fires. Even in parts of the country where lightning strikes cause the most fires — such as the Intermountain West — humans have increased the number and size of fires, and the length of the season, by three months on average. Fires primarily ignite in areas where humans butt up against the wild: roads, encroaching cities and the edges of agricultural fields. Each year, most ignitions happen on July 4, with 7,762 fires burning in 21 years.

-Maya L. Kapoor



Hydrology technician Andrew Hedrick cuts wedges of snow from a pit on Grand Mesa in western Colorado.

Brooke Warren/HCN

[FROM FLAKE TO FLOW](#)

The Western snowpack is an icy natural reservoir that delivers most of the region's water. But the amount of moisture in snow varies. Monitoring how wet snow is across an entire landscape — information essential for forecasting water supplies and flood potential — is difficult. To figure out how to do it, about a hundred researchers converged on snowy, flat-topped Grand Mesa, in western Colorado, for an ambitious scientific treasure hunt in February. They took measurements and tested dozens of instruments, looking for the optimum suite of sensors to survey “the holy grail” of snow-sensing research: the amount of water held within the snow.

-Emily Benson



[Brooke Warren/HCN](#)

[“When there’s no rehab facilities, what happens is people get arrested, and that’s their first respite of sobriety. ... As a result, Craig is having to expand its jail for people that are there more increasingly for drug crimes.”](#)

—Paige Blankenbuehler, speaking on the “West Obsessed” podcast about how she investigated opioid addiction in rural Colorado for her Feb. 20 cover story “[Overdosed.](#)”

[FARMERS SAY CLEAN WATER RULE GOES TO FAR](#)

In an opinion piece for *The Conversation*, an HCN partner, Reagan Waskom and David J. Cooper from Colorado State University take stock of which waters the Clean Water Rule protects. In February, President Donald Trump issued an executive order to revise the rule. With or without it, ambiguities in the Clean Water Rule have created regulatory uncertainty for farmers, ranchers and developers. If the Trump administration withdraws or weakens the rule, regulators are likely to interpret case-by-case whether tributaries and adjacent waters are covered, as they have since 2006. Repealing the rule won’t answer the underlying question: How far upstream federal protection extends.

[You say](#)

RuthAnne Isbell: “Farmers are concerned with the environment, too, and not all think the (Environmental Protection Agency) should be abolished.”

Michael Stiehl: “The implications could have dramatic effects on interstate compacts, such as the Colorado River Compact, which supplies water from the headwaters states to such population centers as Los Angeles and also the Imperial Valley, not to mention Phoenix.”

Irene Hamilton: “Hope farmers aren’t getting scapegoated. Where does the puzzle piece of fracking fit in this ruling? Or does it?”