Throughout this school year, there have been many significant changes to public lands and other environmental areas. These changes have included National Park fee increases, resource-extraction leasing and the development of artificial-intelligence data centers. This is due to the current administration's emphasis on development, management and economic use alongside conservation.

An AI data center is being built near Delta, Utah, and is planned to be the world's largest. At 1,200 acres, the center will be located just southeast of Delta, where a section of farmland was rezoned to house the data center.

Creekstone Energy, the data center developer, said it is net water-positive, meaning it won't draw from the local water supply; rather, it aims to generate 100 acre-feet of water per 100 megawatts annually.

"It's more efficient, more sustainable, and better for the community," developers said.

High-density power banks will be used and leased out to tech companies for multiple uses, including AI. Millard County is already home to multiple power plants, making it possible to meet the data center's large energy needs. There are over 20 fiber internet routes that intersect in Millard County, making it a hub for global connection.

Creekstone Energy is using an additional 30,000 acres for solar power for the data center, and also hopes to build geothermal, wind and nuclear power plants in the area.

These new AI data centers will have to report yearly water usage under a new law that passed in the January 2026 legislative session. Companies could be fined up to $10,000 per day for failing to disclose the amount.

Resource-extraction Leasing

Around the Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument, Zion National Park, Bryce Canyon National Park and Capital Reef National Park, public lands are now being leased for coal mining. The affected lands are controlled by the Bureau of Land Management, which the Big Beautiful Bill opened for coal and oil leasing in July 2025.

The Trump administration plans to increase energy production in the country, especially fossil fuels. About 48,000 acres of federal land are available for lease for coal mining.

"President Trump promised to put American energy workers first, and today we're delivering," Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum said in the BLM press release. "By reducing the royalty rate for coal, increasing coal acres available for leasing, and unlocking critical minerals from mine waste, we are strengthening our economy, protecting national security, and ensuring that communities from Montana to Alabama benefit from good-paying jobs."

About 12,000 acres of land are set aside south of Bryce Canyon National Park and west of the Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument for coal mining projects. However, it could affect tributaries that flow into the Paria River. Just east of Capital Reef National Park, 2,000 acres are available for lease. Zion National Park is just west of the land up for lease, though the acreage is unclear.

“These are world-class public lands and should be treasured, not trashed,” said Director of Land Conservation at NRDC Bobby McEnaney. “Allowing dirty, polluting coal mining at the doorstep of Zion, Bryce Canyon, Capitol Reef and Grand Staircase–Escalante will destroy exactly what makes these places singular—clean air, dark skies, thriving wildlife, and the economies they sustain. The spaces should be withdrawn.”

Lease sales have already begun, and the Trump administration lowered the royalty tax on the mining companies to 7%, allowing them to compete in international markets. The administration has begun to advance the recovery of valuable minerals from mine waste and the cleanup of abandoned mines.

National Park Changes

The Department of the Interior announced increased entry fees for nonresidents to National Parks. Entry costs for U.S. residents will remain the same, including senior and military passes. Along with cost changes, all passes were digitized on Jan. 1, 2026.

A current annual pass is $80, and the proposed price for nonresidents is $250. The annual pass allows access to over 2,000 recreation sites, including national parks, monuments and forests.

Nonresidents without an annual pass will pay $100 per person, in addition to the original $35 entrance fee, to enter 11 of the most visited national parks, which include Zion, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone and Yosemite.

According to the department's press release, the price increase allows for the maintenance and care of the national parks without increasing taxpayer costs.

The DOI also announced fee-free days for residents, including Presidents’ Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day/President Trump’s birthday, Fourth of July Weekend and more.

However, Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Juneteenth were not included in the list of fee-free days like in past years.

This change has become controversial because of the holidays’ connection to civil rights and being the only U.S. holidays that celebrate black heritage. They are still considered federal holidays.

Many Americans spend MLK Day and Juneteenth doing service projects inside National Parks.

Spokesperson for the nonprofit National Parks Conservation Association, Kristen Brengel, told The Guardian, “not only does it recognize an American hero, it’s also a day when people go into parks to clean them up.”

“Removing MLK Day and Juneteenth from the national parks calendar is more than petty politics—it’s an attack on the truth of this nation’s history,” said NAACP President and CEO Derrick Johnson. “It’s an attempt to erase the legacy of Dr. King, minimize the story of emancipation, and sideline the communities that have fought for generations to make America live up to its promise.”

Conservation

In St. George, Utah, one of the nation's fastest-growing cities, a four-lane highway was approved to run through a conservation area. Supporters feel that the highway is a necessary solution to help ease traffic congestion and rapid population growth. Critics feel that the highway represents economic growth at the expense of environmental areas and local wildlife.

A lawsuit was filed in response to the approval of the highway against the Bureau of Land Management and the Fish and Wildlife Service, alleging that the highway's construction would violate federal laws and harm the endangered Mojave tortoise living in the area.

“We revisited the previous environmental impact statements and encouraged the public to submit further comments for consideration in this environmental assessment,” said BLM Color Country District Manager Gloria Tibbetts in the January 2026 press release. “We are committed to continually monitoring our decisions and balancing our responsibilities as public land managers and good neighbors.”

The highway has been under discussion since 2018, when the Utah Department of Transportation requested that another highway be built to ease congestion in the area. Public comment periods were held in 2020, 2024 and 2025 to discuss the project, but it wasn’t approved until January 2026.

A few dozen tortoises will be moved to another location allocated by the BLM for their habitat.

“The state will receive 929 acres of public lands in Warner Valley of eastern Washington County, and the BLM will receive 89 private acres designated as critical habitat for the Mojave desert tortoise within the conservation area,” the BLM said in a May 2025 press release. “An appraisal was conducted to ensure the exchange was executed at a fair market value.”

Another example of conservation efforts in Utah is in Utah County, where land protected from coal mining since 2006 has received a 20-year extension, during which it remains exempt from coal mining operations.

Although there have been many significant changes to our public land, they are based on good intentions. National Park price increases are meant to benefit the taxpayers, resource extraction leasing is meant to provide cheaper mineral and fossil fuel access and the development of AI data centers is meant to bring Utah “up-to-date” with the rest of the country when it comes to technology. Conservation efforts are increasing to improve the environment and the community.