

A HISTORY of the WESTERN INTERSTATE REGION of the National Association of Counties

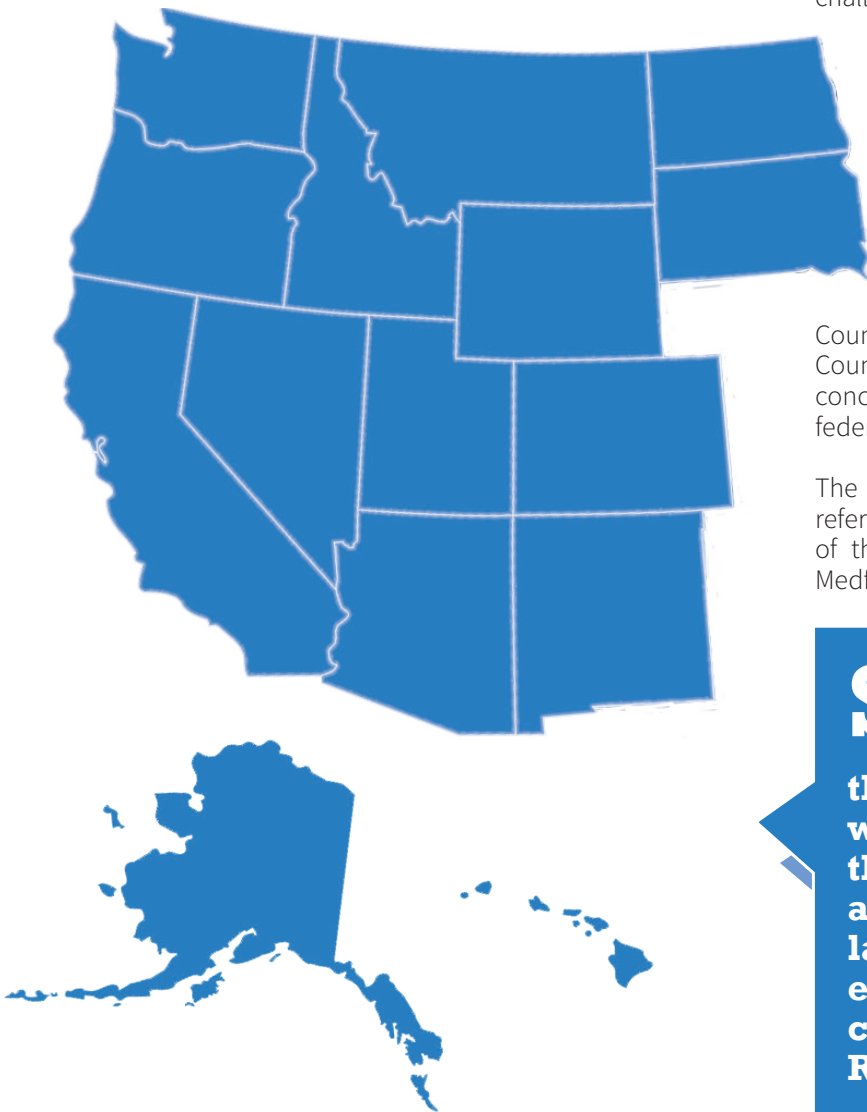
As counties and state associations of counties began to take steps to organize a national association, the unique challenges of the western counties drove them to band together to ensure that their voice was heard. The following is an account of how the Western Interstate Region of the National Association of Counties came to be the voice for western counties.

In the mid to late 1930's the National Association of County Officials (N.A.C.O.) was formed. By the 1940s counties in the west organized a new association of counties for their region. The new organization was called the Interstate Association of Public Land Counties (IAPLC) and was headquartered in Medford/Jackson County, Ore. IAPLC was created to address the issues and concerns of western counties stemming from the massive federal ownership of public land in the west.

The History of the Utah Association of Counties contains a reference to IAPLC in 1941, noting that "Earl B. Day, Secretary of the Interstate Association of Public Land Counties of Medford, Oregon, spoke on the work of the Association."

Since 1978,

the Western Interstate Region has worked within NACo to promote the interests of western counties and advocate on critical public lands, community stability and economic development issues for counties in the Western Interstate Region's 15 member states.



The same history records that in 1944 Mr. F.L. Phipps of Oregon spoke to the Utah Association of Counties on the unique challenges public lands counties face. According to the Proceedings of the Twenty-First Annual Convention of the Utah State Association of County Officials, Mr. Phipps, speaking in his capacity as the executive secretary of IAPLC, said:

“Federal agencies are coming to recognize the counties should be reimbursed for lost income lands taken over by the federal government. This reimbursement must be figured on fair value for the lands, rather than on fluctuating revenue. The present revenue from national forest lands of 25 percent a year is a varying and undependable. The Department of Agriculture has come to recognize the weakness of this system. The revenue distribution formula also is weak, as the several counties whose lands are on federal reservations do not share equally. It is up to local officials to present accurate information on acreage of lands taken over by the federal government. County officials should be prepared to present this data.”

At the same 1944 conference where Mr. Phipps spoke, the Utah State Association of County Officials members adopted a resolution pledging the sum of \$1,000 to N.A.C.O. for the purpose of maintaining a permanent office in Washington, D.C.

Even as N.A.C.O. worked to establish its Washington, D.C. office, calls for a western regional voice within the organization continued. Representatives from seven western state associations of counties met on November 17, 1953 with the purpose of initiating a Western States Regional District organization within N.A.C.O. The group passed a motion authorizing the circulation of a petition within interested states requesting permission from N.A.C.O. to organize a regional district to focus on issues important to the western United States. A committee consisting of William McDougal of California, R.C. Watts of Washington and C.A. Grant of Utah, was selected to draft bylaws for presentation to the 1954 N.A.C.O annual convention.

The Western Region of N.A.C.O. (WR) was officially organized at the 1954 N.A.C.O. annual convention. The six original member states of the Western Region were: Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, Washington, New Mexico and California. A constitution and bylaws for the Western Region of N.A.C.O. were adopted and its first meeting was set for Nov. 19, 1954 in Moscow/Latah County, Idaho. Counties from 11 western states were invited to attend the first WR meeting.

By 1958, the movement to set aside federally designated wilderness areas had become controversial. The History of the Utah Association of Counties records opposition from N.A.C.O.’s public lands committee and IAPLC to the Wilderness Area Act, which sought to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System. In a congressional hearing on the bill, the Utah Association of Counties voiced concerns, pointing out that counties were entirely dependent on revenue from taxes on real and personal property. With 74.6% of the state of Utah containing 52,701,000 acres of federally owned non-taxable land at the time, they argued the state could not sustain more acreage being taken under federal ownership. The association was not voicing opposition to wilderness areas, per se, but rather to the single-purpose use of the lands by a limited few to the potential injury of the people of the state and its counties as a whole.

In 1962, the N.A.C.O. convention was held in New York and featured an array of prominent speakers including Governors Nelson Rockefeller of New York, Terry Sanford of North Carolina and Richard Hughes of New Jersey. At this convention, the name of N.A.C.O. was changed to the “National Association of Counties” (NACo), deleting “officials” from the official name and emphasizing NACo’s role as the only national organization representing the nation’s counties, parishes and boroughs.

In 1978, after years of coexisting and representing the same membership on similar issues, the IAPLC and WR merged into one organization under NACo. The new organization took the name of the Western Interstate Region of NACo (WIR).

Today WIR continues as a regional affiliate of NACo and is dedicated to the promotion of western interests within NACo and advancement of its mission to be the counties’ advocate for public policy issues affecting the west. WIR’s policy focuses include public land use and conservation issues, community stability and economic development, and the promotion of the traditional western way of life. WIR’s membership consists of the associations of counties in 15 western states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawai’i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

