



**Flight Across America Student Program 2017**  
**Wyoming Public Lands Initiative: Wilderness Study Areas**  
*Diversity, Compromise and Bipartisan collaboration in a time of Partisanship*

**EcoFlight is excited to present its 2017 Flight Across America program looking at Wilderness Study Areas in public lands, with a focus on Wyoming.**

#### **Organization Overview**

EcoFlight educates and advocates for the protection of remaining wild lands and wildlife habitat using small aircraft. The aerial perspective and our educational programs encourage an environmental stewardship ethic among citizens of all ages.

From its inception in January 2002, EcoFlight has been providing the aerial perspective that essentially gives the land a voice. EcoFlight brings the power of flight to strategically engage the conservation community, students, media, policy makers and industry representatives, with a goal of collaborating on public lands issues to protect intact ecosystems, watersheds, and our last remaining wild lands. EcoFlight's work with local stakeholders demonstrates there is broad Western support for responsible policies that use commonsense methods to conserve our Western landscapes. An educated and diverse passenger mix ensures effective communication of the public's wishes to leaders and politicians. The Flight Across America (FLAA) student program provides an additional layer in our educational strategy to advocate for balanced Western policies.

#### **Program Overview**

EcoFlight's Flight Across America program informs college students about environmental issues from a broad range of perspectives. Combining flight time in the field with education on the ground, participants learn to better understand complex landscape issues, viewing them from both the all-encompassing aerial perspective and the close up and personal on-the-ground experience. The FLAA program engages students in critical thinking as they explore the complexities of public lands management.

Flight Across America 2017 (October 9<sup>th</sup>-10th, 2017) will focus on Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) in the West, looking at the (Wyoming Public Lands Initiative (WPLI) process in Wyoming. The FLAA program provides an excellent learning environment for students, combining the aerial perspective of the wild character of some of these public lands with on-the-ground discussions of the history behind each WSA, and the challenge to balance competing uses of these lands, whether it is motorized recreation, mineral development or wilderness.

After seeing these landscapes from the air, Students will meet with diverse stakeholders representing many of the interests in these wild lands, and learn how the advisory committees are working together to make well-educated recommendations to their congressional delegation.

Focus areas for discussion include:

- **Wyoming Public Lands Initiative:** The history behind the WPLI, and why 9 of 23 counties are participating in the process, and the 45 Wilderness Study Areas at stake.
- **Threats to WSAs:** students will see from the air the effects of energy development on public lands, and other multiple land uses,

- **Business perspective:** students will meet with local business leaders, including the oil and gas industry, chambers of commerce and elected officials, and discuss economic benefits of public lands.
- **Diversity in our WSAs:** students will meet with diverse stakeholder groups and individuals, such as sportsmen, motorized users, mountain bikers, and conservationists, and discuss how engaging a diverse constituency is a win for Wyoming.

EcoFlight will fly 10 WSAs in seven counties in Wyoming, giving students a new perspective of public lands, and encouraging them to view WSAs and their value in context with local communities, wildlife habitat corridors, and surrounding landscapes. On-the-ground education will include a hike in a WSA, and discussions on why these areas were originally protected, how local communities view this protection, and where compromise might promote permanent protection for some WSAs. The students will meet with guest speakers, such as energy developers, Native Americans, conservationists, ranchers, sportsmen and scientists to hear diverse viewpoints, and get the “big picture” of wilderness protection and its political process. By giving students the opportunity to see public lands from a new perspective, the program encourages them to find out why wild lands are important to them, to discover why they might value these places, to explore them, and most importantly, to have a voice and speak up for the protection of these areas for future generations to enjoy. EcoFlight students will take part in a high school seminar, which will include guest speakers in Jackson on the 10<sup>th</sup>, and will allow participating college students to meet with younger students and share some of their experiences. EcoFlight students will also be required to publish an article in local, regional and national media outlets. With a deeper understanding of the issues, students are given the confidence to participate in meaningful dialogue and advocacy for the natural world as the next generation of public lands leaders.

With the somewhat narrow demographics of wilderness advocates and an aging conservation movement, it is imperative to diversify our public lands advocates. We need to engage with a more diverse cross-section of Americans with a greater age span. With the threats from current partisanship, it is crucial for students to understand the importance of sitting down at the same table, spending time together with typically adverse opponents, getting to know one another, and finding a solution that everyone can live with.