

FEDERAL LANDS ACTION GROUP
1300 Longworth House Office Building
July 28, 2015
9:00 a.m.

Legislative Forum:

Examining the Federal Estate: Options for More Local Control

Opening Statement

Thank you all for being here for our first Federal Lands Action Group forum, titled Examining the Federal Estate: Options for More Local Control. Special thanks to our four witnesses for taking time from busy schedules to help inform our discussion. I realize some of you have traveled a long way on your own dime and we genuinely appreciate that.

I also appreciate my fellow members for being here. Everything we do in Congress is important, but for us this topic is not just important but very personal. Most of us were born in the West. We raised our families in the West. We spent the majority of our careers in the West. And as state and local officials, and business owners, and families we have had to deal with all the challenges and problems created by federal ownership and management of public lands. We organized this working group because we all share this conviction that when it comes to the ownership and management of the vast public lands in the West, there is a better way to do things.

I also want to thank Congresswoman Black for being one of those few members who are not from the West but who have taken the time to learn about these issues and support what we're trying to do.

I want to start with showing us something that will look familiar to all of us. This is a map of Millard County, in my district in Central Utah. Millard County is similar in many ways to counties throughout the west. You can see the State Institutional Trust Lands as the blue squares checker boarded throughout the map, virtually landlocked by the surrounding BLM land. You can see the red lines indicating Wilderness Study Areas. And you can see the only private land is clustered around I-15 on the Eastern side of the county, but even that land is locked into place by the surrounding BLM land. It's not that public land is bad; it's that public land managed by the federal government is inherently managed poorly and hurts the people who live and work near those lands.

Another more extreme example is Garfield County, also in my district. Garfield County is larger than Delaware and only slightly smaller than Connecticut. The county recently declared a state of economic emergency. The federal government owns 93 percent including the over 1.8 million acres in the Grand Staircase National Monument, which has made any type of economic development impossible. The county seat is Panguich, which is home to the Utah Prairie Dog, a species managed under the Endangered Species Act, so even private lands are virtually undevelopable. And Garfield is a microcosm of counties throughout the west. Again the problem is not public lands; it's who owns and controls them. We have to help the rest of the country stop seeing the west as simply a large playground, and instead see it as a

place where people live, work, raise families, and are impacted by the decisions made about public lands.

I don't want to imply that we're the first to try and fix these problems. Many of us have been talking about the problems of federal land management for many years—trying to educate Washington and lay the groundwork for a legislative solution. There are governors, and state legislators, and county commissioners, and others who have been involved in this effort for many decades. This working group is the next step in that effort.

Someone recently mentioned to me that the reason the law firms, banks, and other businesses in downtown Washington DC don't own the buildings in which they work is because property management isn't their core competency. Why would Goldman Sachs—a large investment bank—want to own their building and deal with all the corresponding issues, when they can simply pay someone else to deal with the property, allowing Goldman to focus on their core competency: investment banking? They wouldn't. It's curious that for so long it has been clear to us in the West that the federal government does a lousy job of managing public lands, and yet this misperception persists that the feds are the best ones to continue managing the federal estate. We're here to first talk about why that is not the case, and second about some of the creative solutions that might be available to move that decision-making authority and improve management.

And it's worth emphasizing that in figuring out the best way forward, we're not starting with a pre-determined conclusion. We're eager to learn about some of the innovative options for changing incentives and

pushing decision-making authority down to local officials and those who use the land.

With that, I'm pleased to introduce our witnesses. There will certainly be some overlap in the points they make, but they each bring some unique and helpful perspectives to this discussion. They each have impressive resumes, but I'll be brief with my introductions so we have plenty of time for our discussion.

First, we'll hear from Robert Nelson, professor of environmental policy at the School of Public Policy of the University of Maryland. Dr. Nelson also worked in the Office of Policy Analysis of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior from 1975 to 1993.

Next will be Elwood Miller, a former professor of forestry at the University of Nevada, Reno. Dr. Miller is a professional forester of over 50 years, and is currently the coordinator of the Nevada Network of Fire Adapted Communities.

Next we'll hear from Glade Hall who is an attorney at the Nevada law firm of Hutchison and Steffen. He has practiced law in Nevada for more than 35 years, including serving as Deputy Attorney General for the Nevada Public Service commission.

And finally, we will here from Greg Walcher, who is President of the Natural Resources Group. Mr. Walcher previously served as the executive director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources and later became president of the Natural Resources Leadership Council of the States.

For the sake of getting in a lot of good questions, we'll stick to the five minute rule. And since we are recording the event, please remember to turn on your microphones while you speak.

We'll now turn the time over to Doctor Nelson.