

Congressman Chris Stewart
Federal Land Action Group Forum
February 9, 2016
Opening Statement

Thank you for being here today. It is always nice to get together with the Federal Land Action Group. We started this group almost a year ago to find solutions to the various federal lands problems we are facing throughout the Western United States.

Times are tough in much of the rural West. Recent events have illustrated that lands issues are contentious and getting more so. On January 22, several of us in this group were able to attend a field hearing regarding the BLM resource management plans in Washington County, Utah. We heard from various local officials how their priorities and concerns were ignored in favor of more restrictive land management practices. The frustration was palpable. In attendance were hundreds of environmentalists urging us to ignore the local elected officials and hundreds more ranchers and recreationists who were urging us to push the BLM back to the drawing board. After the hearing, we conducted a public lands listening session. There was a long list of issues ranging from BLM law enforcement, collusion between environmental groups and land management agencies, unfair restrictions of AUMs, lack of access to public lands, and the fear of an impending monument designation. The list went on and on.

Soon after our Jan. 22nd events, conditions heated up in the standoff in Oregon, culminating in the death of one of Malheur Wildlife Refuge illegal occupiers. The underlying factors which led to Malheur have not been resolved and are almost certainly going to get worse.

And this doesn't even mention the Administration's recent decision to stop new coal leases under public lands. This single act alone threatens to kill about one-third of the jobs currently available in parts of my district. County officials are angry. Those who rely on that coal for employment are beyond depressed as they witness their livelihoods ripped away.

I can tell you in that I have never in my life seen the unrest over the federal management of public lands as they are right now.

Which all begs the question, is there no other way?

Are we truly locked into a paradigm that mandates federal control and ever more restrictive land use? Is the rural west truly only just a place that tourists visit? Is there no way to both conserve and use the land so that locals can continue as employed outside of the hospitality sector?

And that brings us to the topic of today's forum.

In our two previous forums we have explored some of the problems in current federal land management and we've raised several promising solutions for devolving control over public lands away from the federal government and to those closer to the lands. Today we'd like to take a more detailed

look at several of those ideas that have been raised in previous forums. We're pleased to welcome three witnesses who are experts in public land policy and who I'm confident can help us navigate these issues.

First is Robert Nelson, who joined us at our first forum last July and was kind enough to return and lend us his expertise as we take a deeper dive into this material. Doctor Nelson is a professor of economics at the University of Maryland, and prior to academia spent many years as a Senior Economist at the Department of Interior. Doctor Nelson has an international flight to catch later this evening, so we understand he will need to leave about 5:20. Doctor Nelson, we're grateful to have you spend a few minutes with us.

Next we will hear from Karla Jones, the Director of the International Relations and Federalism Task Force at the American Legislative Exchange Taskforce. Karla authored ALEC's report just last September titled, *Federally Managed Lands in the West: The Economic and Environmental Implications for the States*. Among other helpful information, the report looked at some of the innovative approaches Canada has taken in improving its public land management. We're eager to hear from Karla and discuss the findings of the report.

And finally, we will hear from Randal O'Toole, a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute who has written extensively about urban growth, public land, and transportation issues. Randal is the author of several books, including *Reforming the Forest Service*, as well as a number of articles exploring various options for taking public land management out of the hands of the federal government, all of which has been helpful to us as we have prepared for this forum.

We look forward to the testimony from each of you, and with that we'll turn the time over to Doctor Nelson.