

NAFSR Talking Points on Disposal of Public Lands

April 7, 2025

The NAFSR Board of Directors (Board) is aware of increasing talk in some circles about transferring large amounts of Federal lands, including National Forest System (NFS) lands, to states or other entities. The Board is monitoring the issue and plans to send a letter to Congress expressing our concern. As you may know, the prospect of direct sales of public lands for deficit reduction recently surfaced in the U.S. Senate. On April 4th the Senate defeated an amendment by a vote of 51 to 48 that would have prevented direct public land sales for deficit reduction. As a result, that prospect remains a possibility. Proposals of this nature have surfaced in the past but lacked widespread public and congressional support. In the current political climate, there is no guarantee of what might happen. While no public proposal to transfer large swaths of NFS lands has been disclosed publicly as of this date, the general concept has continued to be discussed by some Members of Congress, Governors, and in other circles. Your Board has a team closely monitoring the issue.

The Administration recently announced plans to transfer certain BLM lands near larger towns and cities to address housing issues. We are not opposed to considering something similar for NFS lands if adequate controls and processes are in place. Several existing statutes provide comparable authority and could be used as guidance (see talking point below). The following “Talking Points” about the direct sale of our public lands or transfer to the States are provided for your use:

- There is probably no greater public lands issue than their loss. Could we really lose our treasured National Forests and Grasslands by having them transferred or privatized? The answer is **possibly**, unless you and millions of other Americans get involved. There could be an attempt to directly sell public land or transfer our public land to the States. This is really a two-step process to disposal. History shows that giving public land to the states can be the first step to their eventual sale to private interests. Most of the western states have land they received at statehood. In total they have disposed of around 31,000,000 acres according to National Wildlife Federation data. There have been bills floated in various state legislatures to dispose of additional state lands. At issue is not the ability of state land managers to professionally manage state lands. Our observation has been that they do a good job. The issue is; once transferred, those lands can more readily be disposed of. Processes to do so vary by state, as do state legislative mandates on how to manage them.
- Beyond the potential transfer of land to states, some Members of Congress and others have discussed the concept of selling large amounts of Federal land to reduce the deficit. During recent consideration of the Senate Budget Resolution, an amendment to prevent

such sales was defeated by a vote of 51-48. Specific legislative proposals to sell large blocks of public land may now be considered in the House and Senate as the committees work through the budget reconciliation process. NAFSR unequivocally opposes selling our public lands for the purpose of deficit reduction.

- If you enjoy camping, hunting, fishing, skiing, mountain biking, snowmobiling, riding an OHV, horseback riding, bird watching, rafting, mountain climbing, and many other outdoor recreation activities without having to face a “No Trespassing” sign, then you are encouraged to take action if there is a public land transfer or land sale proposal.
- Actively support the bipartisan *Public Lands in Public Hands Act* (Congress.gov H.R. 718). This bill would require congressional approval for selling or transferring public lands managed by the Department of Interior or the US Forest Service. Colorado College’s most recent State of the Rockies poll, which is a gold standard measurement of the public lands pulse across eight western states. shows that 65% of voters **oppose** transferring federal land to states. Eighty-nine per cent want to keep National Monument designations in place. According to the poll, by nine to one ratio, western voters prefer that career professionals make decisions about natural resources on federal lands. You can find all these details online in the Colorado College Conservation in the West poll.
- For those who work in the massive outdoor recreation industry that depends on these lands being available to average Americans, many could lose their jobs. Americans could lose their access. You will hear that the recent and pending loss of many hundreds of employees in our federal natural resource agencies will result in work not getting done on the ground. We agree with that assessment and are concerned that it could lead to more calls for federal land transfer because public services are not being provided, and work is not getting done on the ground.
- President Theodore Roosevelt had it right. Our public lands belong to all Americans and should be managed under federal protection. He acted to save America’s diminishing natural resources and brought 230 million acres of public land under protection as national forests, refuges, parks and monuments. They are the envy of the world and managed using scientific principles that have become the bedrock of public land management policy. Go anywhere in America and enjoy the fruits of those wise decisions we have enjoyed for well over 100 years. Are there ways to be more efficient and find new processes and save money? Yes. There always are. Gained efficiencies were especially notable because of technological advances during our careers. Losing our heritage of public lands in America is not the answer. Once these treasured lands are gone, they are likely gone forever.

- NAFSR is not opposed to the proposal to identify and transfer, sell, or lease federal lands to local communities close to metropolitan areas to be used for affordable housing if adequate controls and processes are in place. The *Southern Nevada Public Land and Management Act enacted in 1998*, the *Forest Service Facilities Realignment and Enhancement Act of 2005*, and the *Flexible Partnership Act* which was part of the last Farm Bill are good examples of successful legislation that may be useful today.

- The answer to pushing back on federal public land disposal is to get involved in whatever way you can. There is an organization for every outdoor pursuit. Join one and work with your friends to make a difference. But above all, now in this moment of potential danger to our public land heritage....be ready to contact your legislators, go to their meetings, and let them know what you think. Ask your family and friends and organizations to do the same, because always remember when American's public lands are gone, they're gone!