



Five politicians determined to give away America's public lands

A small but vocal cohort is leading efforts to transfer federal land to the states. Is your congressional representative on the list?

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The Trump administration has so far attempted to shrink the federal government's role in healthcare, environmental protection - and even Meals on Wheels. Some Republicans now see another area ripe for giveaway: public lands.

During the Obama administration, Republicans made numerous attempts to open up federal lands for development or cede control of areas to the states. This push was largely made by representatives from a few western states, where the federal government manages roughly half of all land.

With Donald Trump in the White House, Republicans in Congress are redoubling their effort to overhaul the way that national lands are used and protected, provoking often fiery debates in town hall meetings and in the run-up to a special election in Montana.

A bill that would have led to the sale of millions of acres of land was withdrawn after a storm of protest from the outdoor industry, hunters and environmentalists, but a core of Republicans continue to agitate for federal land to be shifted to the state and private industry.

Ryan Zinke, the interior secretary, has said he's "not an advocate for sale or transfer of public lands", although he is overseeing a review that could result in the resizing or eradication of some national monuments declared in the past two decades.

Some Republicans hope this rethink will go further and reshape the ownership structure of public land in the US, despite the overwhelming popularity of the status quo among the public.

Here are five of the leading Republican voices calling for land transfers.

Jason Chaffetz

He may be on his way out of Congress, but Chaffetz, the chairman of the House oversight committee, has become the figurehead of Republican efforts to give away public lands.

The Utah congressman put forward a bill that would have sold off 3.3m acres of national land overseen by the Bureau of Land Management, only to back down following an outcry from sportsmen and conservationists. He announced a change of heart after hearing the response of "groups I support and care about".



Jason Chaffetz with his wife Julie. Photograph: Rick Bowmer/AP

A companion bill, which would disband federal law enforcement serving Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service lands, remains, although it has yet to be voted upon. Chaffetz said the move would free up resources for the federal government but it has been called a "poacher's dream" by sportsmen's advocates.

Chaffetz faced voter anger over his approach to public lands when he was booed and jeered over the issue, as well as other topics, at a town hall meeting in February.

Undaunted, Chaffetz has set his sights on the Bears Ears national monument. The 1.35m acre wilderness was designated by Barack Obama in December to the consternation of Chaffetz, who called it a "slap in the face to the people of Utah".

The congressman revealed that reversing this decision was the "number one" item he raised in recent talks with president Trump. The Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, which represents five

native American groups, has stressed that the monument holds important cultural treasures and its repeal would be “an affront to Indian people all across the country”.

Rob Bishop

Remodeling the federal lands system has long been a pet issue for Bishop, another Utah Republican and chairman of the House natural resources committee. In March, he called for a “paradigm shift in our nation’s approach to federal land management”, demanding that \$50m be assigned to help transfer federal land to state, local and tribal governments.

Bishop has led the way early in the Trump administration in striking out various “egregious” Obama-era restrictions on methane leaks and pollution of streams from mountaintop mining. In January, Bishop scored a notable victory when Republicans changed the way Congress calculates transferring federal land to the states. Democrats said the move essentially allowed federal land to be handed over for free, potentially opening it up to developers.

Bishop has also targeted the Antiquities Act, which has given presidents the power to unilaterally designate protected areas since 1906. After Obama named three new parks last year, Bishop said that the move “makes states and citizens fearful that the federal government can invade at any time to seize more lands like bandits in the night”. He did not mention that the lands were already nationally owned and managed.

Perhaps most controversially, Bishop has voiced sympathy for the armed militia that seized a wildlife refuge in Oregon last year. “I want it to end without violence, but I also understand the frustration and feelings people have working with land agencies,” Bishop told E&E Daily in January 2016 (the occupation ended with more than two dozen members arrested a month later). “They have been very heavy-handed.”

Lisa Murkowski

As Alaska’s senior senator, Murkowski has repeatedly championed fossil fuel extraction in the state, with more local control of land for resource development.

Last year, she advanced a proposal that would allow for oil and gas drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, citing economic and national security concerns. The Trump administration’s budget wish-list supported this plan. She also backs the idea of selling off publicly held forests and wildlife sanctuaries.

“What people unfortunately relate to when they think of Alaska oil was when the Exxon Valdez went aground because of a captain that was drunk,” Murkowski said in 2015. “But when you look to how we have been safely producing and moving Alaska’s oil for decades, it is a track record that is enviable.”



Lisa Murkowski with Don Young. Photograph: J. Scott Applewhite/AP

More recently, Murkowski has championed the transfer of a portion of Tongass national forest in south-east Alaska to state control and worked to stall an Obama administration plan to phase out out-growth logging of the area.

Don Young

Young, Alaska's sole congressman, is the driving force behind the Tongass transfer plan, which would give up a slice of the US's largest national forest to the state.

A bill sponsored by Young would allow the state to select and purchase up to two million acres of Tongass for logging or other activities.

In April, Young told a local community forum in Petersburg, Alaska: "There's no opportunity of any other type of resources development and you have to have resources development, in time you will need it."

Conservationists object to the bill, arguing that an expansion in logging would hurt the tourism and fishing industries, as well as imperil federal funding for the area.

Mark Amodei

The federal government, in one form or another, manages around 80% of Nevada's land. This irks Amodei, a House Republican from the state. He put forward legislation that would transfer lands back to the state, before ditching the bill in May following protests from sportsmen and environmentalists.

"Transferring millions of acres of public lands ... is not something I think the majority of people think is a good idea," Amodei admitted to the Reno Gazette-Journal.

Amodei commented that the federal government got its "butts kicked" by supporters of Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, who owes the US \$1m in unpaid grazing fees and continues to graze his cattle illegally on public lands.

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