

My Turn

Forces of development and transfer on public lands have grown

John Miles

The Taos News, 2/16/2017

Like many New Mexicans, Taosenos enjoy and appreciate public lands.

We cut firewood, gather pinyon nuts, hunt, fish, hike, ski, mountain bike, raft, birdwatch, graze cattle and more. But now, if you use public lands, you should be concerned.

A movement is afoot to deprive us of a significant portion of these lands that we Americans own and share. Bills have been introduced in Congress and state legislatures to transfer federal public lands to state and private control. This mischief takes other forms: Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, has introduced HR 622 to pull funding for public land law enforcement by the Forest Service and BLM; the U.S. House has just passed a resolution that could eliminate the BLM's ability to update their planning regulations. The list could go on.

This effort to reduce the public domain is nothing new. Early in U.S. history the aim was to transfer all public land to private ownership. Then the American people decided over a century ago that some land should be retained in the public interest. Conservationists argued for protecting portions of the public domain to assure timber supply, quality water resources, and protection of natural beauty, among other values, by withdrawing them from private claim. This resulted in the national forest, national park, and national wildlife refuge systems. Much land in the West was unclaimed because it was too dry, high, rocky and generally considered unproductive. That land ultimately fell under management of the BLM, and in time, much BLM-managed land became valuable.

What is new is the current political situation regarding federal lands with Republicans in control of Congress and Trump in the White House. The potential for unleashing forces of development and transfer on public lands has grown. Corporate interests such as the Koch brothers have sought to ease their path to resource development on federal lands for decades, and now they seem to have their greatest opportunity so far. They are organized to take advantage of this opportunity – the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), an industry-funded group of state legislators – has drafted model transfer legislation that has been introduced in western public land states like New Mexico. The states do not have the power to effect transfer, but the U.S. Congress does, so we can expect more effort from some states to convince Congress to act.

Back in the mid-20th century, ranchers in the West launched a movement advocating transfer of federal lands to states. They acted in response to the creation of the BLM in 1946 when the Grazing Service and the General Land Office merged bringing the prospect of more regulation to damaged rangeland. They thought states would be easier to sway to their way of thinking about the public domain. Writer- historian Bernard DeVoto at the time called this

effort “one of the biggest land grabs in American history.” The issue increased in intensity again as the Sagebrush Rebellion in the 1980s. Today’s land grabbers are primarily corporate interests who want easier access to public land resources like gas and oil. Members of Congress like Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, who chairs the House Committee on Natural Resources and Lisa Murkowski, R-AK, chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, seem intent on doing all they can to further the corporate and ALEC agendas. The challenge for those who would defend the federal public land and their managers is thus greater than it has been in recent memory.

While federal land managers have by no means done everything right, they have many friends. Among them are sportsmen and outdoor recreationists of all stripes who enjoy access to their land that would be denied or more difficult if in other hands. People who care about wildlife and natural beauty support the federal domain and do not want wildlife pushed to extinction and scenery defaced by industrial development.

We who believe that federal public lands, lands owned in common by “we the people,” should remain in federal (that is “our”) ownership and we must step up and say so. When our own Sen. Martin Heinrich comes to Taos Feb. 22, we should thank him for his strong support of federal lands, and pledge to work with him; Tom Udall; and our Representative Ben Ray Lujan to thwart the current land grab that threatens. Taos has long supported public lands and now is the time to rise once more to their defense.

Miles lives in El Prado.



“People who care about wildlife and natural beauty support the federal domain and do not want wildlife pushed to extinction and scenery defaced by industrial development.”

Shutterstock