

Traditional Bowhunter[®] Magazine

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This Land is Your Land

The idea has been around for a while now, dating back to the Nevada-based Sage Brush Rebellion of the 1980s. Like a lot of bad ideas, it can be dressed up to look good at first glance: Get those vast, “mismanaged” tracts of western public land out of the hands of the distant, incompetent federal government and into the hands of people who know how to use it right. However, in its current iteration the push to disburse these federal lands represents a greater threat to the future of American hunting than anything the anti-hunters could have come up with in their wildest dreams.

This potential disaster resurfaced as a sleeper—a little-noticed plank in the 2012 Republican Party national platform that openly called for the sale of these lands to the highest private bidders. When I called this to readers' attention at the time, a lot of you didn't believe me—until I showed it to you in black and white. (Feel free to look it up again on the Internet.) The idea didn't fly in that form—it was a bit too obviously selfish. Now the wealthy interests behind it in the first place have re-packaged it in what appears to be a more palatable form: bills in several western state legislatures calling for transfer of these lands to state control. In an age rife with anti-Washington sentiment that sounds appealing, until you take a closer look.

States like Montana—the one I know best, because I live here—are rich in land, resources, and wildlife, but poor in cash. Western states simply don't have the finances to manage these additional millions of acres. The cost of one bad fire season would wipe out the coffers, at which point these recently acquired lands would wind up on the auction block, which is exactly what the movement's backers had in mind in the first place. Those buyers won't be people like you and me, and it wouldn't take them long to start locking gates, building high fences, and privatizing the game that lives inside them.

Consider what's at stake. Right now, American hunters of ordinary means enjoy vast opportunities to hunt elk, antelope, deer, and other game species on public land in the West, opportunities of the kind only the fabulously wealthy can enjoy in other countries. That could all disappear with a stroke of the pen, and right now a lot of powerful interest groups are preparing those documents for signature.

Let's be clear. This is not a matter of Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative. These lands are not currently owned by “the government.” The landowners are the tax-paying citizens of the United States—all fifty of those states. As Woody Guthrie once reminded us, “This land belongs to you and me.”

If some powerful interests get their way, that won't be true for long. Here in Montana, we've already had a taste of what happens when wealthy outside interests purchase old family ranches and lock the gates behind them. Now, we can still fall back on the great hunting available on BLM and Forest Service land. Are we going to stand by and let those opportunities vanish? If you have ever dreamed about hunting western elk, antelope, or mule deer without coughing up half your hard-earned paycheck to rent a key to a gate, you had better join the millions of American outdoors men and women who have already seen through the smoke-screen and said, “Hell, no!”

*Don Thomas
Co-Editor*