



## House Republicans Want to Use Taxpayer Money to Help Steal Public Lands

*Representative Rob Bishop is seeking \$50 million from Congress to cover the costs of federal land seizure.*

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If burglars were preparing to break into your house and pilfer your prized possessions, they normally wouldn't approach you in advance and ask you to pay for the lock-picking tools and gas up the getaway car as well. But that, in essence, is what Congressman Rob Bishop, chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources, requested of the American people in the shocking report he released last week.

The report, drily titled "Views and Estimates for Fiscal Year 2018," is a wish list of sorts that Bishop sent to his colleagues on the House Budget Committee as they begin crafting Congress' fiscal priorities for the year ahead. The report sounds boring—it *is* boring—but boy is it brazen.

In this report the white-haired Congressman from Utah rails against federal lands, arguing that they "isolate communities, limit growth, adversely impact land value and can lead to violations of property rights." He provides scant evidence for these broad-brush claims, mind you. Instead, he simply calls on the federal government "to convey certain lands to state, local and tribal governments, with no strings attached...."

What Bishop proposes here, in layman's terms, is the theft of public land. He wants the American people as a whole to relinquish their rightful claim to national forests parcels and more, *for free*.

Then Bishop drops the real bombshell: "[T]o allow for these conveyances to start immediately, we ask that you build in \$50 million into the budget to cover possible impacts on offsetting receipts."

That's right. Not only are the American people supposed to give away their land free of charge, they're also supposed to set aside \$50 million to cover the costs of the dispossession. If Bishop gets his way, taxpayers will be bankrolling the public land burglars.

How, by the way, did the Congressman arrive at the seemingly arbitrary figure of \$50 million?

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“The \$50 million number is a recognition that there are costs associated with undertaking transfers, including the costs to complete surveys of lands that in many cases are in very remote areas,” writes Parish Braden, communications director for the natural resources committee, in an email. “Ultimately, however, we believe the net benefit to generations of local communities will far exceed the costs of undertaking the transfer.”

The “Views and Estimates” report, which runs to 13 pages, contains other proposals too: It calls on the Bureau of Land Management to revoke the Obama administration's federal land coal leasing moratorium, it calls for rescinding or diminishing certain national monuments across the country, it articulates the natural resource committee's staunch opposition to the expansion of the public land system, and it paints a very negative picture of our federal lands in general.

Taken as a whole, Bishop's wish list distills into a single document the corporatist anti-conservation narrative that has come to dominate our national dialogue. For decades, far-right organizations like the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Property and Environment Research Center—many of them associated with the political network of the billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch—have relentlessly crafted, publicized, and promoted the story that the federal lands are broken and in disrepair, that they are mismanaged and neglected, and that they are tyrannical to boot.

To solve this overhyped problem, these well-financed groups recommend a free market takeover of the public sphere. They propose privatizing and deregulating federal lands and rolling back conservation programs, rather than bolstering and better funding such programs and landscapes.

Bishop's report hews closely to this narrative, seemingly incognizant of the fact that the public lands have broad support across partisan divides in the American West and that they also support a multi-billion-dollar outdoor recreation economy.

Braden, the natural resource committee's communications director, denied that Bishop had worked with the Cato Institute or the Heritage Foundation in developing his wish list.

The House Committee on Natural Resources has published similarly hardline reports in the past, but this year things are different. With Trump in the White House and Republicans in complete control at the federal level, Congress might be inclined to do the ultraconservative committee's bidding. Using the budget and appropriations process, Congress could follow Bishop's lead and finance federal land transfer, withhold funds from newly minted national monuments like Utah's Bears Ears, greatly weaken endangered species conservation efforts and undermine the proper working of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

“I think what is so alarming about this year’s views and estimates letter is what a full bore attack on the public lands it really is,” says Alan Rowsome, a senior government relations director at the Wilderness Society. “This out-of-touch blueprint for public lands is hugely problematic and it might ultimately find its way into a final appropriations bill, unless people stand up now and say this is not what the American public wants.”

Bishop’s reports hearings, policies, and priorities might sound boring, but if you care about keeping public lands in public hands it’s time now to pay attention.