

THE INDEPENDENT

— *A voice for Utah* —

Federal Land Action Group holds third public lands forum

February 21, 2016

Rep. Chris Stewart, chairman of the Federal Lands Action Group, and Rep. Rob Bishop, chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources, hosted their third forum in a series aimed at exploring best practices with regard to public land management and ownership.

The forum was held Feb. 9 in Washington D.C. and included witnesses representing experts in the fields of public land policy. Witnesses presented testimony and answered questions from members of Congress in the action group.

“Times are tough in much of the rural West,” said Stewart in his opening remarks. “Recent events have illustrated that lands issues are contentious and getting more so. In our two previous forums we explored some of the problems in current federal land management and we raised several promising solutions for devolving control over public lands away from the federal government and to those closer to the lands. Today, we took a more detailed look at several of the ideas that have been raised in previous forums.”

“As the President has unveiled his latest budget proposal, it is clear he is not interested in smart solutions,” said Bishop. “He continues to throw money into failed land management programs. This forum has demonstrated that, not only are there better ways to budget resources, but there are better ways to manage federal lands.”

Witnesses included Karla Jones, Robert Nelson, and Randal O’Toole.

“Federal control of public lands that rightfully should be under state administration has led to environmental and economic mismanagement,” said Jones, director of the American Legislative Exchange Council Task Force on International Relations and Federalism. “It is encouraging, however, that the western states are petitioning for control, which will benefit the lands inside their borders and both their state economies and the national economy.” Read Jones’ full testimony [here](#).

“There is a growing recognition that the system of federal ownership of nearly half the land in the American West is serving the region poorly,” said Nelson of the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy. “It is inhibiting the economic use of the lands and is also environmentally damaging — mismanaging the national forests, for example, to create unprecedented acreages of wildfires now burning at new intensities. The rural West is deprived of the normal experience of democratic governance as it is experienced in other states and

localities across the United States. Broadly speaking, public land reform could move in three basic directions: privatization, transfer of federal lands to state and local governments, and management reforms within the existing system of federal land ownership.” Read Nelson’s full testimony [here](#).

“The key to resolving public land debates, is not who owns the lands but what systems of governance and incentives guide land managers,” said Randal O’Toole, a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. “Two key reforms would resolve nearly all federal land debates. First, federal land managers should be allowed to charge fair market value for all resources people use and should be funded exclusively out of a share of the receipts they collect. Second, federal lands should be turned into fiduciary trusts, which would fundamentally change the incentives faced by land managers.” Read O’Toole’s full testimony [here](#).

A video of the forum can be found [here](#).

More information about past forums is available [here](#).

About the Federal Land Action Group

In April 2015, Stewart and Bishop launched the Federal Land Action Group, a congressional team that will develop a legislative framework for transferring public lands to local ownership and control.

The group, chaired by Stewart, will build on the work started by Utah and other states in recent years.

“The federal government has been a lousy landlord for western states and we simply think the states can do it better,” Stewart said. “If we want healthier forests, better access to public lands, more consistent funding for public education and more reliable energy development, it makes sense to have local control.”

“This group will explore legal and historical background in order to determine the best congressional action needed to return these lands to the rightful owners,” Bishop said. “We have assembled a strong team of lawmakers, and I look forward to formulating a plan that reminds the federal government it should leave the job of land management to those who know best.”

The Federal Land Action Group will hold a series of forums with experts on public lands policy with the goal of introducing transfer legislation.

Members of the group include:

- Rep. Chris Stewart (R-Utah), chairman of the Federal Land Action Group.
- Rep. Rob Bishop (R-Utah), chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee.
- Representative Mark Amodei (R-Nev.).
- Representative Diane Black (R-Tenn.).

- Representative Jeff Duncan (R-S.C.).
- Representative Cresent Hardy (R-Nev.).
- Representative Cynthia Lummis (R-Wyo.).
- Representative Raul Labrador (R-Idaho).