



Written by [William F. Jasper](#) on May 14, 2014

Hearings in Montana Legislature on Fedgov “Public Lands” Transfer

On Wednesday, May 14, the Montana legislature’s Environmental Quality Council and the legislature’s Federal Lands Study Group will hear from a number of Western states that are actively pursuing corrections in federal land management and efforts to bring about the transfer of millions of acres of federally controlled “public lands” to the states.



Montana State Senator Jennifer Fielder, who chairs her state’s Federal Lands Study Group, penned an [Op-Ed on the Transfer of Public Lands](#) that briefly explains the issues involved and the economic, environmental, and liberty benefits that would accrue to Montanans by assuming control over lands now controlled by federal agencies.

As *The New American* has reported, Sen. Fielder was one of the organizers of the Legislative Summit on the Transfer for Public Lands held in Salt Lake City on April 18 and attended by more than 50 legislators, county commissioners, and other leaders of the 12 Western states most affected by the federal government’s enormous footprint and economic dominance. (See: [Western States Want Feds to Surrender “Federal” Land](#), [Feds vs. the West](#), and [War on the West: Why More Bundy Standoffs Are Coming](#).)

“It’s a big idea and it’s rightfully reaping big debate nationwide,” writes Senator Fielder in her op-ed. “Can and should states assume control of federally held public lands within our borders? Many colleagues and experts throughout the west have studied the issue intensively, and we now believe there’s no reason why we can’t.”

“The challenge is to get the facts on the table, put protections in place consistent with Montana values, and prepare our state agencies for an orderly transition,” she notes. “We also have to educate decision makers and compel Congress to honor the Constitution and the terms of our statehood enabling acts which require federal title to be extinguished.”

According to Sen. Fielder:

The Nevada model for transfer of public lands would leave Wilderness, Indian Reservations, Military installations, National Parks, Wildlife Refuges, and Dept. of Energy facilities under federal jurisdiction. Utah’s proposal is similar.

Montana’s study of public lands shows Montanans want more multiple use access, reduction of wildfire fuels, and more economic production. But federal agencies systematically continue to do the opposite of what we want.



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Present Fedgov Control of Western Lands

In Nevada, the federal government controls around 85 percent of the land area. In Alaska it's nearly 70 percent; in Idaho, more than 50 percent; in Montana, about 30 percent.

"Shifting to state based public land ownership would mean Montanans — not Congress, the President, or any other state — would decide how much access, use, protection, and production we would want to see," says Sen. Fielder. "I cannot imagine any collection of people who care about Montana's communities, environment, and economy more than Montanans do. There is no question that 25 million acres of federally controlled public lands in our state directly impact our land, water, air, wildlife, economy, and people in a number of ways. The same cannot be said of states like New York, New Jersey, or Florida."

Moreover, says Sen. Fielder:

With the national government facing insurmountable debt, the threat of the federal government selling our public lands to the highest bidder is imminent. In fact H.R. 2657, which authorizes the sale of hundreds of thousands of acres, passed out of a Congressional committee earlier this year. They can sell public lands without our input, and they are undoubtedly under pressure by foreign debt holders to do so. That's a big concern.

The Positives of Transfer

"On the bright side, a multitude of studies reveal legal standing and economic advantages favoring state based public land management," says Fielder. "Nevada's most recent analysis shows a net gain up to \$1.5 billion per year if they take over management of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) properties in their state, even while maintaining existing uses such as recreational access, grazing, mineral, and other use rights."

The meeting on the Public Lands is open to the public and will take place May 14 at the State Capitol in Helena at 3:30 p.m.

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