

Jason Chaffetz Testimony

Natural Resources Committee

30 January 2017

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today regarding H.R. 4532 introduced by the second best Congressman to serve from Utah's Third Congressional District in the 115th Congress.

As you know, I previously sat on this committee as I was honored to serve in the United States House of Representatives for eight and a half years serving Utah's Third Congressional District. Having represented many parts of Utah, I am intimately familiar with the land, the people, and the issues.

I live in Utah. I care about Utah. My wife and I raised our children in Utah, and we intend to continue to live in Utah throughout our lives. We enjoy the scenic outdoors and regularly take advantage of the access we have within a short drive of our home. We enjoy all four vivacious seasons and want nothing more than continued access and preservation of this beauty in a very unique part of our world.

Unlike most states in our union, nearly 70% of the State of Utah is owned by the federal and state government. This puts tremendous pressure on local communities.

Most dramatically it affects the way we are able to educate our children. In San Juan County, for instance, only 8% of the county is private property. It is this private property that generates property taxes to educate our children. This affects all the residents in San Juan County, especially the children of the Navajo Nation.

Personally, I have fought to improve the federal commitment to our schools, fighting for and securing an increase in appropriations for rural school bus routes. Many of you on this committee supported this effort, and I again thank you for the much needed support.

Another major burden for county government is the emergency services needed to support such a massive amount of land. In the case of San Juan County they are expected to provide first responder services on the federal land with no

reimbursement by the federal government. With millions of acres in play, you can see how search and rescue services can put a massive financial burden on a small county budget.

Oh, by the way, San Juan County is nearly the size of New Jersey. It is big, expansive and beautiful.

The financial burdens for the counties is exasperated by uneven and inconsistent funding of PILT (Payment In Lieu of Taxes), but we will have to tackle this subject another time.

The legislation before you today does not convert any public land to private property. It does not solve the funding problems and challenges, but it does address a challenge long identified by Chairman Bishop and keenly recognized by Representative Curtis.

I will be submitting to the record two letters from Chairman Bishop dated February 22, 2013. Here is part of what he wrote to local tribal leaders:

“After observing and participating in the public lands debate for many years, I believe we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. There is a growing consensus that a more reasonable, balanced use of the public lands can be achieved in Utah. Through conversations with county and state officials, tribal leaders, conservation groups, industry, non-government organizations, and the public. I believe Utah is ready to move away from the tired arguments of the past. We have a unique window of opportunity to end the gridlock and bring resolution to some of the most challenging land disputes in the state.

“In order to strike an appropriate balance between conservation and responsible development and use, and to create greater certainty for the citizens of Utah and Indian Country, I am pleased to announce that I am initiating a process to develop federal legislation that seeks to address many of the issues that have planned public land management in eastern Utah.”

Through the years Rob Bishop and I, along with very capable staff, conducted more than 1,200 meetings. Yes, 1,200.

Our goal was to achieve certainty for the local communities and state, move beyond perpetual lawsuits, and maximize local input from the broad cross-section of stakeholders. We called our approach the Public Lands Initiative or PLI.

There are 29 counties in Utah but we limited the scope of our work to seven continuous counties in southeastern Utah. We worked with every possible stakeholder.

This effort included my flying with San Juan County Commissioner Rebecca Benally to Flagstaff, Arizona on August 18, 2015 to meet with Navajo Nation President Begaye to talk about our public lands initiative for Utah. I brought up the so called “Bears Ears” monument. President Begaye had never heard of Bears Ears nor did he have any idea where it was located. His concern

then was about access for local Navajos- access that is not found with a monument designation.

We were convinced then, and I am convinced today, the stakeholders identified in the bill before you today maximizes input, allows for a broad discussion, makes the process transparent, and will give the public confidence in its outcomes.

The areas identified in the legislation include no reservation lands.

I believe the bill put forward by Congressman Curtis is fair, inclusive, and necessary. I appreciate the work he has already been invested into this important subject.

This new legislative effort puts all of us in the best possible position to ensure this area is managed in a way that truly takes into account the perspectives of national and local tribes, multiple stakeholders and the interests of Utahns.

This corner of the world is one of the most beautiful on Earth. I hope someday you are able to visit. The culture of these public lands is rich in history, and I am sure you will come to love these lands as our family has. It is vital we get the structure of management right, and the approach by Rep. Curtis is the right way to do this.

I thank the committee for its consideration and I would be happy to answer any questions.