

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

October 7, 2015

The Honorable Sally Jewell
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretaries Jewell and Vilsack:

The Land and Water Conservation Fund Act (LWCF) is over 50 years old and has only been amended a few times in that 50 years. The House Committee on Natural Resources (Committee) is closely examining the law to make necessary changes and improvements. To simply reauthorize the law, without first examining its successes and addressing its failures, would be irresponsible.

Currently the Federal government owns an amount of land equal to one third of the continental United States. The Committee is dedicated to making sure those federal lands are cared for and maintained in a way that meets the needs of the American public. Most laws dictating federal land management need to be updated to meet the needs of the 21st Century for all Americans and federal land managers.

Recently, the House of Representatives took a step in this direction by passing common-sense, bipartisan amendments to the Small Tracts Act, by an overwhelming vote of 403 – 0 on September 16th. This bill allows the U.S. Forest Service to sell small isolated parcels, cemeteries, landfills, sewage treatment plants, and other federal lands identified for disposal and use the proceeds to acquire lands that will increase recreational and other access and accomplish key deferred maintenance projects.

Nonetheless, the Committee is concerned that land adjustment efforts, including conveyances and exchanges, are languishing while land management agencies are focusing almost solely on new acquisitions. Of particular concern is the vast acreage of checkerboard ownership across the nation, which is difficult to manage for federal agencies, states, private landowners, and counties alike. Of equal concern is the lack of marked boundaries of existing federal lands on the ground. For example, we understand that only 12 percent of National Forest boundaries are surveyed and marked, resulting in countless instances of trespassing and encroachment. To put it plainly, the federal government generally does not know what it owns.

As the Committee finalizes improvements to the LWCF Act, we are seeking information from each of your agencies regarding recent land acquisitions, goals accomplished through those acquisitions, and ongoing basic stewardship of existing federal lands. To that end, we would appreciate your prompt responses to the following questions and requests:

1) Please provide a list of all properties acquired by the federal government using LWCF funds over the past fifty (50) years, including the acreage, cost, location and prior ownership. Please also include the aggregated acreage and cost of those acquisitions. If a third party, such as a land trust, was involved please include the name of the land trust. If the prior ownership was held as a "purchase option" by the land trust prior to acquisition, please include that information as well.

2) For each of the acquisitions identified above, please indicate the following:

- a. If there are wildfire risks or invasive weed problems and/or risks, have those projects to eliminate or control such risks been planned or accomplished? If so, please describe such plans in detail;
- b. If the land was acquired for recreational access purposes, has the road, trail or trailhead been constructed or planned and if so, please indicate the frequency of use for recreational purposes;
- c. Describe boundaries that have been surveyed, delineated and marked on the ground;
- d. For those properties which were acquired as inholdings, please indicate what amount or percent of the land was bordered by federal land (for example, was 50% of the inholding bordered by federal land or just 25%?).

3) Out of the entire federal estate under your jurisdiction, what proportion is made up of non-contiguous blocks of federal land (i.e. "checkerboard ownership")? How many square miles of this federal checkerboard ownership currently exists? How many of these acres are considered at-risk and for what are they at-risk? Please also identify areas that each of your Departments believe to be priority areas for land exchanges and why.

The Honorable Sally Jewell
The Honorable Tom Vilsack
October 7, 2015
Page 3

4) Have your Departments identified the most important parcels or areas which lack recreational access in either resource management plans (RMP) or forest plans, and if so, please provide a complete list of acquisitions using LWCF funds that have successfully provided access to those areas. It is often the case that a right-of-way or access easement would provide access to federal land while not requiring the acquisition of that land. Do the Departments try to purchase rights-of-way in lieu of land acquisition, and is the possibility of purchasing a right-of-way/access easement analyzed before purchasing land for access?

We would appreciate your prompt responses to this request for information no later than November 2, 2015. Please reply to Aniela Butler at Aniela.Bulter@mail.house.gov of the Federal Lands Subcommittee.

Sincerely,



Rob Bishop
Chairman
Committee on Natural Resources

cc: The Honorable Raul Grijalva, Ranking Member, Committee on Natural Resources