

Statement of NC Representative Roger West
NC House of Representatives

BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH

IMPACTS OF FEDERAL OWNERSHIP ON COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

NORTH CAROLINA REPRESENTATIVE ROGER WEST
120th DISTRICT

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Mr. Chairman:

I first want to thank you and your subcommittee for holding this hearing. Being an elected state representative from a rural and economically depressed area, I appreciate the opportunity to represent my constituents before this important committee that oversees federal land policies.

My four-county district in Western North Carolina includes 425,362 acres of US Forest Service lands and that takes up about 47% of the total area, and 67% of available timberland in my counties, according to the most recent FIA data. TVA owns another 14,450 acres of land in my counties and brings my district to 49% federally owned. The 120th District is also bordered by the Great Smoky Mountain National Park that is well over a half million acres of contiguous federal land. Obviously, federal ownership in and around my district is a dominating force economically, socially, and environmentally.

In the early to mid part of the last century the federal government bought huge areas of land in our region for national forests, hydroelectric power generation and a national park. Most of this land had been stripped of forest cover and/or depleted by subsistence farming. We were happy that the feds were going to rehabilitate these lands and make them productive for timber, power generation and playgrounds for a growing nation. We thought this was a good thing and would bring prosperity to our area.

Today, we have mixed feelings about our federal neighbors.

Because of the attractiveness of our mountain environment and scarce availability of private ownership, our private property valuations have increased exponentially in the last couple of decades while the contributions of federal ownership through PILT and the 25% of timber sale revenue have not kept pace. My constituents pay higher taxes to compensate for lagging federal commitments in order to maintain and develop the necessary infrastructure and services to support our communities. In addition, federal agency maintenance backlogs in our area reveal their inability to maintain their own infrastructure. In many cases this creates problems for our communities who rely on it for connections to state and county systems. The bottom line is that my counties do not recoup from federal revenue sharing the increased costs for infrastructure and services such as law enforcement, search and rescue, and fire protection/control directly related to federal ownership.

Because of the proximity of my counties to designated wilderness areas on National Forests and The Great Smoky Mountain National Park bordering my district, any commercial or industrial development has far more scrutiny by state and federal permitting agencies. This, coupled with a small private land base, makes industrial recruiting a nightmare for local governments.

It is my view that in order for my district to prosper, we must have a good mix of industrial, commercial and service sectors in our local economy. We are rapidly losing what little industrial base we have to globalization and we are at a distinct disadvantage in competing for new industry.

One of my counties, Graham County, consistently has one of the highest unemployment and poverty rates in our region. It is no surprise that it also has the second highest percentage of federal ownership at 63 %. Swain County, that borders my district, has the highest percentage of federal ownership, at 73%, and their unemployment and poverty rates mirror Graham County's. I believe there is a correlation here.

It has also been frustrating, as we have witnessed broken promises from our federal neighbors. A long-promised road through the heart of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park was begun many years ago that would have steered lots of visitors annually to my counties; however, it was abandoned due to environmentalists' objections. We call it "The Road to Nowhere" because that's where it ends-up – nowhere. While the future of the road is much in doubt since it was originally promised in 1941, we hope that the road will be completed as promised and we'll get the economic benefits that will surely come with it. We have also seen the national forests drastically reduce their output of the valuable hardwood timber essential for the remaining forest products industries in my district. Again, this is the direct result of the whining of environmental zealots and lack of backbone in national forest leadership. The lack of a reliable and consistent timber program on two-thirds of my district's timberland makes any expansion of this industry impossible.

Our federal neighbors are gradually restricting the harvesting of plants and herbs for medicinal, nursery, and floral arrangement materials that many of my constituents have relied upon for supplemental income for generations. Another sign that Uncle Sam is no longer our favorite relative.

Since our country's humble beginnings the abundance of natural resources has been the cornerstone for our remarkable economic and social development. Unfortunately, in areas dominated by federal ownership, we are now hobbled by federal agencies focused on preserving rather than conserving these valuable resources.

In summary, Mr. Chairman, it can be argued that federal ownership is an asset and drawing card for our area. I agree that there are some benefits for public ownership that make our area an attractive place to live and play. However, the people who live in my district deserve a fair chance in competing for an improved quality of life and economic development. It is my experience that having these large federal neighbors is a burden for local communities as they strive to improve their conditions. I hope that this committee will actively pursue resolutions that will help level the playing field.

Thank you for your time and consideration.