

America's Public Land: Exposing the Land Transfer Efforts

Welcome to the Public Land Transfer Presentation for America's Public Land. I'm Carey Dabney.

America's Public Land is a national coalition of concerned citizens working to raise awareness about the growing threats to our public lands.¹

For decades, certain groups have promoted a false narrative about public land ownership, aiming to convince Americans to give up these lands to the states—without realizing the consequences.

This presentation explains the movement to transfer, sell, and privatize public lands, and provides resources to help you take action—by starting conversations with others, sharing on social media, speaking to community groups, writing to local media, and most importantly, contacting your members of Congress.

Walt Dabney, founder of America's Public Land, believes “Every American deserves to know the truth about the threats to their public lands from unscrupulous politicians, developers, and corporations.”

Walt is a retired park professional with a 43-year career spanning both the National Park Service (NPS) and Texas Parks and Wildlife.

A graduate of Texas A&M, he began his career as a ranger-naturalist in Yellowstone and went on to serve in key leadership roles across iconic parks including Yosemite, Grand Teton, Everglades, and as Chief Ranger of the NPS in Washington, D.C. He later led the Southeast Utah Group of parks and served as Director of Texas State Parks.

Known for his expertise in law enforcement, search and rescue, fire management, and public land policy, Dabney now teaches at leadership institutes and universities and frequently speaks on the history of America's public lands.

My passion for public lands began with childhood road trips out West, leading me to study anthropology and geology at the University of Illinois and work as a seasonal ranger in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks.

In 2020, I led the League of Women Voters of Utah's study on the Transfer of Public Lands Movement, examining the history of public lands, the land transfer movement, and the legal, economic, and social impacts of those efforts.²

I now volunteer with America's Public Land, curating research on the politics of land sell-offs and highlighting the vital role public lands play in all aspects of American life.³

So what are the lands we need to protect from privatization?

America's public lands include national parks, forests, monuments, trails, conservation areas, historic sites, rivers, wildlife refuges, and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands.⁴

While most are located in the West, these lands belong to all Americans—not just the states where they are found. Many people are familiar with national parks, but the majority of public lands are not parks. They support a range of uses including recreation, grazing, mining, and conservation.

The federal government manages roughly 640 million acres, about 28% of all U.S. land.⁴ Four main agencies oversee 95% of it: They are the:

- U.S. Forest Service
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
- Fish & Wildlife Service
- National Park Service

Throughout America's history the U.S. government's role has included policies for acquiring, disposing of, and retaining public land.⁵

Where did these lands come from?

Before European settlement, the land that is now the United States was home to Indigenous peoples who had lived on these lands for thousands of years.

As European settlers arrived, they claimed land through conquest and displacement of Native nations. After the Revolutionary War, the original 13 colonies ceded land west of the Appalachian Mountains to the federal government.

West of the Mississippi River, most land was acquired by the federal government through treaties and purchases from foreign powers.

These lands were obtained under the federal government's treaty-making authority and are managed under the Property Clause of the U.S. Constitution.⁶

These lands are important economic drivers for national, state, and rural gateway economies. Operating under different mandates, some of these lands are used to provide timber, minerals, hydrocarbons, and rangelands.

Others, preserve historical and archaeological sites that highlight our shared history as Americans, play a critical role in mitigating climate change, provide our country with clean air and water, provide habitat for wildlife, and are places where every American and visitor from around the world, regardless of socio-economic status, can enjoy the excitement of outdoor recreation and the solace of nature creating lifetime memories for themselves and their families.

So what are the threats to America's public lands?

America's Founding Fathers and mothers believed that an informed citizenry—supported by free speech, a free press, and public education—was essential for democracy, enabling debates based on shared facts.

Although public discourse has long been marred by conspiracy theories and hate speech, the spread of mis- and disinformation poses a critical threat to informed decision-making and to our democratic processes and institutions.

Mis•in•for•ma•tion: Is false or misleading information, regardless of whether it's intentionally created and unwittingly shared.

Dis•in•for•ma•tion: Is false information that is deliberately created and distributed with an intent to deceive or harm others.⁷

For decades, Utah lawmakers have led a well-funded campaign to transfer federally owned public lands into state control—creating a model for other states to follow.

In 2005, S.B. 239 created the Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office (PLPCO) to promote and implement Utah's public land priorities. PLPCO studies land transfer issues and supports the Constitutional Defense Council, which advises the Governor and others on public land policy.⁸

In 2012, despite warnings from the Utah Office of Legislative Research about its likely unconstitutionality, lawmakers passed HB 148, the Transfer of Public Lands Act—fueling a disinformation campaign around public land ownership.⁹

In 2015, Utah's congressional delegation formed a team to explore legal strategies to return public lands to their so-called "rightful owners."¹⁰

Also, in 2015, Utah state lawmakers used taxpayer funds to hire a legal consulting firm tasked with evaluating:

- "Alternative legal theories that Utah may use in court to attempt to gain ownership or control of the public lands within its borders."¹¹

Despite the questionable legality of these theories—Utah legislators continued pushing land transfer bills based on these theories.¹²

In 2017, Utah's Congressional delegation introduced the Disposal of Excess Federal Lands Act.¹³

And in January 2025, the U.S. House passed a rules package making it easier to sell off public lands. Under the rules, lawmakers will no longer need to account for lost revenues from nationally managed public lands if they decide to give those lands away to states or other interests. The Congressional Budget Office, which provides lawmakers with data so they can make budget decisions, will effectively consider public lands to have no monetary value, making wholesale sell-off of lands much simpler.¹⁴

However, the lands in question are neither "excess" nor "without monetary value."

- They are the lands from which all of our parks, monuments, forests, recreation and wilderness areas have been derived under authority of the Property Clause or the Antiquities Act.
- They are the lands all Americans have access to for hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, jeeping, and so much more.
- They are the lands that fuel our outdoor recreation industry to the tune of \$9.5 billion dollars in Utah, and \$1.2 trillion dollars nationally.¹⁵
- They are the lands that in 2008 were officially recognized as the National System of Public Lands.¹⁶
- And despite the fact that these lands have broad support among Utahns and Americans, Utah legislators continue spending taxpayer money on disinformation campaigns to seize them from the American public."¹⁷

In August 2024, Utah filed a taxpayer-funded lawsuit asking the U.S. Supreme Court to decide whether the federal government can hold unappropriated public lands within a state indefinitely.¹⁸

At the same time, the state launched a \$2 million PR campaign—*Stand for Our Land: Let Utah Manage Utah Land*—to spread misleading claims through ads, billboards, TV, and social media. The campaign targeted national media, policymakers, and public opinion.¹⁹

Utah politicians know these lands don't belong to the state.

They know "*Let Utah Manage Utah Land*" is misleading.

They know this campaign distorts the facts—

Because on July 14, 2025, during a court hearing, the State of Utah had to admit that its taxpayer-funded "Stand for Our Land" lawsuit and PR campaign is misleading.²⁰

In its legal filing, the state conceded that:

- The public lands targeted in its lawsuit were never owned by Utah.
- That Native American Tribes have lived in present-day Utah since time immemorial and the U.S. acquired the land from Mexico in 1848.
- That upon joining the Union in 1896, Utah citizens "forever disclaim[ed] all right and title" to unappropriated public lands.
- That this disclaimer was a condition of statehood, included in both Utah's Constitution and the Utah Statehood Enabling Act.

And most telling, that if successful, the State's lawsuit will *not* result in public lands automatically being given to Utah but instead would start a "disposal" process which could result in the sale of millions of acres of public lands to the highest bidder.

So when Utah's elected officials tell you Utah's preference is that public land remain public...should you believe them?

Because another thing politicians engaged in the transfer of public lands into state ownership don't tell you is:

According to a 2014 report commissioned by the state titled *An Analysis of a Transfer of Federal Lands to the State of Utah*, "Two primary concerns regarding the land transfer from the federal government to state government are the cost of managing the lands, and whether the state could generate enough revenue to cover that cost."²¹

The report indicates that the following revenue and resources would be lost to the state if the land is transferred out of federal ownership.

- Federal wages and spending which are an infusion of outside money into Utah's economy
- PILT payments paid to counties to offset loss of tax revenue on U.S. public lands
- Costs for wildfires which make up almost 35% of the estimated direct land management cost for US public lands in Utah that currently are 90% paid by the BLM and US Forest Service

- Loss of access to key firefighting resources including trained personnel, a fleet of aircraft, fire dispatch capacity and aviation support infrastructure
- Deferred maintenance costs of approximately \$100 million dollars because of insufficient funding over several decades; And
- Abandoned mine openings (8,000 to 11,000) that need to be inventoried, field validated, and remediated, with 5 to 10 percent of these openings having associated water quality issues.

Per the same report, in order to make up for the loss of federal dollars, mineral revenue produced on public lands including mineral lease revenue, oil and gas royalties, and coal royalties would have to be increased.

Based on the 2014 economic analysis, "... the land transfer could be profitable for the state if oil and gas prices remain stable and high and the state negotiates a change in royalty revenue share [with the U.S. government] from 50 percent to 100 percent."

In addition, land based revenue and receipts collected by the BLM and US Forest Service including recreation fees, right-of way rents, grazing fees, and timber sales receipts also are a potential source of revenue if the state takes over these lands. But they too, would probably need to be increased.

The following figures are operations and management budget and costs underwritten by the federal government for the lands being targeted by the 2012 TPLA legislation, and do not include federal money expended on the National Park Service or the Fish and Wildlife Service lands in Utah, except for Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT).

In 2018, in excess of \$400 hundred million dollars of federal funding was expended in the state of Utah in support of public lands. If the state acquires these lands, they will lose those federal funds and have to make up the difference with state funding, or will have to sell those lands into private hands.²²

The truth no one talks about is the fact that state ownership of America's Public Land in Utah, or any other state, would slash the tax base for supporting these lands from 50 states to one state.

By law, states have to maintain a balanced budget. If the state can't afford to keep them, they would have to sell them. These lands will become private property.²³

And although the Supreme Court declined to hear Utah's case, the state can still refile in a lower federal court or pursue new lawsuits aimed at gaining control over federal land.

Gov. Cox, President Adams, Speaker Schultz and Attorney General Brown released the following statement:

"While we were hopeful that our request would expedite the process, we are disappointed in the Supreme Court's decision not to take up this case. The Court's order does not say anything about the merits of Utah's important constitutional arguments or prevent Utah from filing its suit in federal district court.

"Utah remains able and willing to challenge any BLM land management decisions that harm Utah. We are also heartened to know the incoming Administration shares our commitments to the principle of "multiple use" for these federal lands and is committed to working with us to improve land management. We will continue to fight to keep public lands in public hands because it is our stewardship, heritage and home."²⁴

Looks like none of them are backing down. And neither should you.

To help you advocate for your public lands, we created a toolkit that offers clear, accessible information and practical steps anyone can take to help protect these vital landscapes. It includes:

- A one hour feature film *The History and Future of America's Public Land*
- Reports exposing the disinformation behind the land transfer movement
- Guidance on what to watch for in the future
- And how to contact your elected Senators and Representatives to Congress.

Get informed. Get engaged. Tell everyone you know what is happening. Share this information on social media, in letters to the editor, with community groups, and with your elected representatives at the local, state, and national level. They need to know the truth about America's Public Lands.

Make keeping public lands in public ownership a campaign issue. The vast majority of Americans love their public lands. We can vote to keep them. Or we can vote to lose them. Find out what those running for office plan to do. And then vote accordingly.

"Because the Constitution empowers Congress to turn public lands over to states or private interests if it so wishes, defenders of public lands should not be complacent.

Public lands will remain in U.S. ownership only if that policy continues to command the support of the American people."²⁵

Footnotes

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