



The “Great American Outdoors Act” is a federal land grab slush fund

By Bonner Cohen, Ph. D. | June 13th, 2020

In a display of bipartisanship that is as rare as it is frightening, Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill are joining forces to impose their own brand of socialism on rural America.

The scheme being cooked up by lawmakers of both parties is something called the Great American Outdoors Act. Backed by 44 Democrats and 15 Republicans in the Senate, and eagerly supported by Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, the bill, among other things, requires the federal government

to spend at least \$900 million each year to add to the 640 million acres the feds already own, and largely mismanage, throughout the country.

Funding Mechanism for Land Socialism

While America has for the most part avoided the disastrous socialist schemes that have put whole industries into the hands of bureaucrats elsewhere in the world, land is another matter altogether. The federal government already owns about 30% of the land in the U.S. In the 11 western states and Alaska, the feds, through four agencies, control over 50% of the land, with many counties having 90% federal ownership.

For a government drowning in deficits, the sensible thing to do would be to sell off as much of the Bureau of Land Management's millions of acres as buyers are willing to purchase. That would encourage private ownership of property, with all the responsibilities and liberties that come with it. It would also be a source of much-needed revenue at the federal, state, and local level.

Instead, embracing the environmentalists' vision of as much government ownership of resources as taxpayer money will buy, Congress is intent on federal agencies gobbling up even more land. This nationalization of private property would be financed through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is supported by revenue the federal government obtains by selling the rights to explore for and produce oil and natural gas in the coastal waters of the United States.

As noted by Myron Ebell, Director of Energy and Environment at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, socialism as traditionally practiced and American-style land socialism differ in one key respect.

"[W]hen Britain nationalized steel mills and coal mines in the 1950s, they continued producing steel and coal (although in practice, production tended to go down and then down some more)," he wrote in the *Washington Examiner* (June 8). "But when the four federal land agencies – the Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management – buy private land, the purpose is to take it out of production and 'preserve' it."

Consequences of Government Ownership of Land and Resources

What will actually be preserved is the poverty that is endemic in areas characterized by widespread government ownership of land and resources. The more land the government owns in a given area, the lower the tax revenues to maintain roads, bridges, drinking water systems, schools, and other community services. It is all part of the longstanding, if rarely acknowledged, environmentalists' goal of what writer Ron Arnold has called "rural cleansing." Make it increasingly difficult for people to make a living in a rural area, and they will be forced to migrate to the cities, however reluctantly.

How badly do the greens want more government ownership of land? So badly that they are willing to turn a blind eye to the finance mechanism that under the Great American Outdoors Act will make the acquisition of private land possible: revenues from oil and gas exploration and development in coastal waters. That's right. The very fossil fuels said to be responsible (along with coal) for causing a "climate crisis" are lovingly embraced because they make possible more government ownership of land.

Yes, this is hypocrisy. Yet this green hypocrisy is no less glaring than that of Republican senators who, a short time ago, beat their chests in their opposition to the Green New Deal. Now, many of them, such as Colorado's Cory Gardner, Tennessee's Lamar Alexander, North Carolina's Richard Burr, and Ohio's Rob Portman, are eager to foist their own Green New Deal on the rest of the country by backing the land-grabbing Great American Outdoors Act.

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