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Time for Return to Reasonableness in Federal Land Grabs

BY KERRY JACKSON

Nearly half of California isn't actually California. It's an extension of Washington, D.C. Almost 46 percent of the state's land mass is owned by the federal government, according to the Congressional Research Service. This means business opportunities in virtually half of the state are greatly restricted. In some locations, they're entirely off-limits.

Disproportional federal ownership of land is typical in western states. The Congressional Research Service says that Washington, DC owns 79.6 percent of Nevada land, 63.1 percent of Utah, 61.6 percent of Idaho, and 61.3 percent of Alaska.

The land is administered primarily by five federal agencies. The Forest Service is the largest manager of California property, with nearly 21 million acres under its authority. The BLM controls more than 15 million acres while the Park Service supervises 7.6 million.

California's coastline extends 1,100 miles and a good deal of it is owned by the federal government. This includes 41 miles of beach at Vandenberg Air Force Base, 17 miles fronting Camp Pendleton, and "numerous small islands along the length of the California coast," according to the Congressional Research Service. In all, about 8,000 acres of California coastline is under federal ownership, says Jonathan Wood of the Pacific Legal Foundation.

Much of this property has high value and could spur economic development favored by many Californians if a portion is sold. In a November 2016 Field Poll, 75 percent of California voters said limited options for affordable overnight accommodations is a real

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problem when visiting the coast. Selling some of this land could lead to the building of new lodging that could spur new jobs and more tourism to the Central Coast.

Unlocking economic opportunities such as these can't be overstated in a state that is losing businesses at a frightening pace – as many as 9,000 fled between 2007 and 2015.

Undeveloped land would also be better off. Terry Anderson, a leader in the free-market environmentalism movement, wrote last year in the New York Times that “federal management of the West's resources has been disastrous for decades.” Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute says that history has clearly shown that federal control over land “usually creates disincentives for sound environmental management.”

Utah Rep. Jason Chaffetz has introduced legislation to sell 3.3 million acres of land in 10 western states. Selling the property would not only “free up resources for the federal government,” as he said, but also kick off tremendous economic prospects.

Opponents say selling federal land would harm the environment, but experiences from other states show that embracing the free market can both create jobs and improve environmental stewardship.

Idaho has sold 41 percent of its land to private ownership since it achieved statehood, the Idaho Statesman reported last year, and it didn't set off an environmental disaster. Much of the property was sold to timber companies, ranchers, and homeowners. But a portion was sold to private fishing clubs. As private owners, they have a greater incentive to be responsible stewards of the land than a remote government agency has.

Environmental interests, many of whom have deep financial resources, would also be free to compete with other potential buyers to acquire this land. The Sierra Club, for example, reported nearly \$132 million in total assets in 2015 while the Natural Resources Defense Council, according to Charity Navigator, has \$243.6 million in net assets.

Washington, DC owns about 48 million acres in California. By taking a reasonable approach to land ownership, the federal government could spur new jobs and tax revenue along the Central Coast, while promoting good stewardship of California's national wonders.

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