

**TESTIMONY OF MARGARET BYFIELD  
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**BEFORE THE  
U.S. HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES**

**ON  
H.R. 34, THE LAND AND SOCIAL SECURITY OPTIMIZATION ACT (LASSO ACT)**

Mr. Chairman, Representative Gosar, and honorable members of this committee, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the importance of passing the Land and Social Security Optimization Act, the LASSO Act (H.R. 34).

My name is Margaret Byfield. I serve as the Executive Director of American Stewards of Liberty<sup>1</sup>, a 34-year-old property rights organization based in Texas. We have members all across the nation, many of whom are the people who steward our federal lands. They are the ranchers, farmers, timber producers, miners, oil and gas developers, hunters, and recreationists—the people who have made these lands their home and who support our vital rural communities.

I was raised on a large livestock operation in Nevada, where we held the right to graze lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Through both personal and professional experience, I have seen the damage caused to families, communities, and economies when our federal lands are not utilized as Congress intended.

This is why I believe the LASSO Act is needed. It will highlight the federal mismanagement of these lands and help correct this by creating a direct link for every American citizen to benefit from the important multiple-uses of our national resources.

The bill allocates ten percent of the revenue generated from these lands, identified as “covered lands” in the bill, to be deposited into the Social Security Trust Fund. This simple transfer increases the immediate and long-term durability of the Social Security program, which is on course to be insolvent by 2033. Importantly, it incentivizes the proper stewardship of these lands by tying the citizens’ prosperity to the flourishing of our abundant natural resources.

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<sup>1</sup> American Stewards of Liberty is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is to protect property rights and the liberties they secure by defending the use of our land, and restoring local control. This testimony is provided to educate Congressional Members on federal actions that erode property and identify responses that would bring these actions in alignment with full Constitutional protection of these rights.

The bill also helps accomplish the original purpose for these lands. Under Article IV of the Constitution<sup>2</sup>, Congress determines the purposes for federally-owned property, and this body has made a distinction between lands that are to be protected and lands that are to be productively used.

According to the Congressional Research Service<sup>3</sup>, “The federal government owns roughly 640 million acres, about 28% of the 2.27 billion acres of land in the United States.” One-third of these lands are permanently protected, with limited or no productive uses. These have been preserved by Congress through laws such as the National Park Service Organic Act (54 U.S.C. § 100101 et seq.), the Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. §§ 1131–1136), the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (16 U.S.C. § 1271 et seq.), the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act (16 U.S.C. §§ 668dd–668ee), and others.

The remaining federally-owned lands, outside of the 8.8 million acres owned by the Department of Defense, are generally identified as multiple-use lands. These have been set aside for the specific purpose of providing our nation with the natural resource commodities we need to support the health, safety, and welfare of our people and the continued prosperity of our nation.

Through laws such as the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (43 U.S.C. § 1701 et seq.) and the National Forest Management Act (16 U.S.C. § 1600 et seq.), Congress has directed federal agencies to manage these lands in such a manner that all of the uses can occur concurrently, as appropriate. This means a rancher can be grazing the land while a mineral developer is mining energy and critical resources and a timber producer is harvesting timber, all while the public has open access for hunting, fishing, hiking, and other recreational activities.

Our lands flourish when they are worked. That is a fundamental premise of land stewardship<sup>4</sup> in alignment with how God designed our world. Mankind is charged with the responsibility of working the land and watching over it. When we do this, the resources thrive. When we neglect the land, it becomes a wasteland, as we have witnessed in the West where the federal government owns roughly 50 percent of the land base.

Failure to properly steward the lands has resulted in massive wildfires that have consumed everything—homes, businesses, protected species, and wildlife.

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Const. art. IV, § 3, cl. 2:

“The Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States; and nothing in this Constitution shall be so construed as to Prejudice any Claims of the United States, or of any particular State.”

<sup>3</sup> Congressional Research Service, *Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data*, updated February 21, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Byfield, “OPINION: Why ‘stewardship’ should guide how we care for resources,” *Federal Newswire*, Oct. 11, 2025.

Carrying out the multiple-use mandate on our federal lands has been delegated by Congress to federal agencies, primarily the Forest Service and the BLM, which manage roughly 437 million acres. They are charged with ensuring all the uses continue to flourish and provide abundant natural resources today and into the future. When any of these agencies determine that the lands must be restricted, conserved, or locked up, it is an admission that they have failed in the mission given to them by this body.

The productivity of these lands is vitally important to the local communities that steward these resources. For example, in a county such as Custer County, Idaho, where the federal government owns 97 percent of the land, the county government is responsible for maintaining the roads and highways on federal lands, providing emergency services to people who recreate there, and delivering other essential services.

But the federal government does not pay property taxes as a private landowner would. It is the revenue generated from the commodities produced on these lands that makes up this deficit. In simple terms, if the people cannot utilize the natural resources, the dependent communities die. There will be no close service that can quickly rescue a stranded hiker, or injured hunter. No gas stations or grocery stores. No necessary services that allow the public an opportunity to enjoy these lands.

When people's livelihoods are tied to the productivity of the land, they take better care of the resource. If this generation's Social Security checks are funded, in part, because we have the ability to cultivate and productively use our abundant natural resources, how we manage these lands for their best and highest use becomes important.

Why is it that private lands are more productive than federal lands? It is precisely because the small landowner's entire paycheck, now and in the future, is determined by how they take care of their land today—not by how much they extract today, but by how well they steward their property so that it continues to produce resources well into the future. That land is the small landowner's 401(k) retirement plan, and it is what they leave to their children.

In the same way the LASSO Act ties every citizen's future Social Security retirement funds to the productivity of our federal lands. It creates an intrinsic motivation for all of us to support actions that foster better stewardship of these lands.

It may be helpful to revisit how these multiple-use lands came into being. Unlike the eastern states, the western states did not come into the Union on equal footing. Instead of having ownership of the lands within their jurisdiction, federal policy changed, and the federal government retained ownership of roughly 50 percent of the lands in the western states.

Importantly, however, the western states were given ownership of all the water and wildlife within their jurisdiction on federal lands. State law, not federal law, determines who owns the

water on federal lands. In areas suitable for livestock grazing, that is usually the rancher who holds the grazing preference. The states, not the federal government, determine what wildlife can be hunted and the duration of seasons.

When the western states came into the Union, most of the territory had been settled; otherwise, the states would not have been established. The first settlers had already carved out homesteads, secured water rights, developed grazing operations, and established mineral and timber operations—making the rugged, untamed West a vibrant part of the national economy. These early settlers were following the Homestead, mining, and other acts that governed land settlement in the United States at that time.

When Congress determined to hold, instead of dispose of the lands, it created a significant controversy in the West. Some historians describe this as an action that could have set off another civil war<sup>5</sup>.

To prevent this, laws were passed that recognized existing rights and allowed for the productive use of resources to support essential local economies. A series of land-use laws were passed by Congress that recognized multiple uses and protected established rights.

An example is the Taylor Grazing Act (43 U.S.C. § 315 et seq.). It determined the allotment boundaries of livestock and sheep operations. If a settler could prove he owned the water rights on the grazing lands, had base property contiguous to the land, and he or his predecessors were the first to make beneficial use of the lands, he was given a priority grazing preference over another user who migrated through the area.

The original laws governing the federal lands largely satisfied the early settlers. They had the assurance that their rights were protected and that these lands would always be used productively for the benefit of the American people.

Fast-forward to today, and we have witnessed a progressive erosion of these rights, a reduction in production, an increase in government regulations, and even an attempt by the BLM to circumvent Congress and administratively change the purpose of these lands from multiple use to a conservation policy that eliminated all other uses.

This brings us back to the reason we need to have the LASSO Act passed out of this committee and enacted into law. It allows every American to benefit from the productivity of these lands, with ten percent of the revenue generated going directly into the fund that helps provide for their retirement.

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<sup>5</sup> Wayne Hage, *Storm Over Rangelands* (Bellevue, WA: Free Enterprise Press, 1989)

Let me close with a story. When Thomas Jefferson was in France, he often toured the French countryside. On one of his walks, he was passing through an area known as “King’s” land. These were lands set aside for the kings and lords—the elites of their time—to hunt, fish, and recreate. They were covered in lush meadows and large forests.

He caught up with a poor woman who was walking to the next town and struck up a conversation. He learned she was a day laborer with young children at home, hoping to find work in the next town. She had helped him with directions, so he handed her a few coins as they parted. She burst into tears. Jefferson believed this was because she had never before received such great aid.

That evening, Jefferson captured this experience in a letter written to a friend in America<sup>6</sup>. The date was October 28, 1785. He wrote:

“...with the solitude of my walk, [it] led me into a train of reflections on that unequal division of property which occasions the numberless instances of wretchedness which I had observed in this country and is to be observed all over Europe. The property of this country is absolutely concentrated in a very few hands.”

Jefferson pointed out that the people were not poor for lack of resources. The lands he walked through that very day could have provided essential materials and food for many—that is, if they had not been set aside as playgrounds for the elite classes.

“I asked myself what could be the reason so many should be permitted to beg who are willing to work, in a country where there is a very considerable proportion of uncultivated lands. These lands are undisturbed only for the sake of game.”

He noted that a society that would withhold valuable natural resources from the people instead of allowing them the opportunity to utilize those resources was not a just society.

“Whenever there are in any country uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right. The earth is given as a common stock for man to labor and live on.”

He concluded his letter by stating that we cannot allow this to happen in the new world.

“But it is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The small landholders are the most precious part of the state.”

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, October 28, 1785, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 8, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 681–83.

America was founded on this core principle: that the people would have the right to own and fully utilize the land. But as the West was settled, instead of disposing of the lands, the federal government became the landowner.

Importantly, however, Congress also guaranteed that our multiple-use lands—and even protected lands—would not be locked up from the people. These lands would be productively used, except in very rare cases as Congress determined, to ensure every citizen had the opportunity to help steward the land, witness its infinite beauty and wildlife, and enjoy the bountiful resources it produces for human flourishing.

The LASSO Act is a smart approach to carrying out this charge. But it is not unprecedented. It follows a proven model that states have enacted and applied to State Trust Lands. The revenue from these lands in many states is allocated directly to their education funds. This has created a reliable stream of funding for state education systems.

Our federal lands could provide a similar measure of durability by allocating ten percent of the revenues directly to the Social Security Trust Fund. These lands can and should help every American citizen have a better future.