

Testimony in support of H.R.8454, to provide for the transfer of administrative jurisdiction over certain Federal land in the State of California, and for other purposes,

submitted to the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Chairman Tom Tiffany
Ranking Member Joe Neguse

submitted by:

Tim Erickson
Owner/Operator, Erickson Ranch

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of Representative McClintock's H.R.8454, to provide for the transfer of administrative jurisdiction over certain Federal land in the State of California.

I am Tim Erickson, and for the last 137 years, my family has operated a cow-calf operation in the area that is now best known as Yosemite. My great-grandfather came to this country from Ireland and settled in northern California because he saw the promise of a future of land, water, and a bright way of life in the place my family still calls home. My grandfather started the operation as we know it today, running cattle in this highly productive landscape. My family has weathered a wide variety of challenges in this place, from the creation of the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir to the establishment of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), to today's challenges of catastrophic fire, skyrocketing public access, and competing values for land that for seven generations has been used to feed our valley and beyond.

My wife, Bette Ann, and I took over the operation in our mid-20s. Today, I am able to work with my son, Dan, and his family to continue this legacy of stewardship and tradition. My grandchildren are the sixth generation to carefully manage these landscapes that range from high alpine meadows, productive riparian zones, and forested pastures. When I took over primary management as a young man, I assumed several USFS permits as part of the ranch portfolio. Over time, we have acquired additional permits to expand our operation and improve our ability to graze cattle in rotations that made sense both for our family and the land. Ackerson Meadow has always been owned and used our family – at least as long as I can remember. We used the meadow as part of a larger rotation, where our livestock would graze in other parts of the meadow series in the summer, and we'd gather in Ackerson Meadow in the fall on the upper end of the allotment. It doesn't receive heavy utilization, but is a key part of how we move our cattle from the forest summer grazing lands to come back home in the fall. After we gather our cattle in the upper end of the meadow, we take the calves home in trailers and trail our mother cows home, about 50 miles. This fall cattle drive is something special for both us and our community. It has built a long history of support for what we do, particularly when fire has threatened our lands and communities.

In 2013, much of our grazing allotments were burned. We lost forage and cattle, like many of our neighbors. After the fire, we spent a great deal of time rebuilding infrastructure and restructuring our grazing with USFS both to respond to the immediate damage of the fire, but also the massive rebound in forage in the next few years. We manage our grazing to reduce the fine fuels to mitigate the risk of a hot, fast fire moving through. This is important not only for the safety of our cattle and our family, but also for the neighboring lands. As we're discussing as part of H.R.8454, a significant portion of the neighboring lands are now part of Yosemite National Park, which receives millions of visitors each year.

Equally, the land subject to the terms of H.R.8454 has long been part of my grazing allotment. My family owned and managed this meadow as part of our ranch for more than 100 years, before it was sold following an estate transfer in my family. The buyer ultimately engaged with the Trust for Public Lands and made the decision to take the land out of multiple use.

When the Trust for Public Land acquired Ackerson Meadow in 2016 and subsequently donated the land to the National Park Service, it was widely opposed in the community because it further decreased the available land in the county for property taxes (Tuolumne County is more than 77 percent federal land, leaving just over 20 percent available for property tax). Additionally, the transfer ultimately created an unnecessary challenge for management of contiguous lands. The bill effectively swaps administrative jurisdiction between the USFS and the National Park Service (NPS) for a 160-acre parcel of National Forest System Land to be managed as part of Yosemite National Park (herein, “the Park”), and a 170-acre parcel of National Park System land to be managed as part of Stanislaus National Forest. By enacting this transfer, this committee would be addressing management challenges because of the “checkerboard” nature of the lands surrounding these parcels. The parcel currently managed as part of the Park was previously part of my federal grazing allotment, and is currently surrounded by the Stanislaus National Forest. By enacting this transfer, it eliminates an administrative inholding, clarifies the responsibilities of management, and returns a parcel to multiple use in a way that is beneficial for both USFS and for the community.

Eliminating administrative inholdings and streamlining land management is crucial for these areas that will face additional public pressures and fire risk each year. Grazing is a crucial management tool for meadows like Ackerson and Stone Meadows – both managed by my family – that are highly-productive and could be high risk ecosystems. We manage our grazing in rotations to reduce fuels at key points in the year before the tall meadow grasses dry out and are at risk of ignition. Additionally, our grazing has contributed to range improvement in Ackerson Meadow in support of riparian developments. This is particularly important because in this area, water can become scarce in the season which jeopardizes resources both for livestock and wildlife alike. I believe our shared priorities for this landscape should be keeping livestock grazing on the landscape, protecting the land for all of its productive uses, and reducing the burden on agencies and the American people.

Mr. Chairman, I’m thankful to Representative McClintock for introducing this bill and moving it through the legislative process. Too often, these administrative transfers that are good for the land and good for people get stuck in complex government processes. This bill has previously passed the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and has support from multiple administrations. Put simply, this is just good governance.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, I appreciate the opportunity to share a story from northern California with you today, and I hope you see the important and immediate impact your actions have on families like mine across the country. I thank you for your consideration, and urge the Committee to advance the bill.