



Conservatives  
for  
Property Rights



## **CPR Principles: Public Land Holdings and Use**

*Public lands issues involve government's ownership and regulation of the use of land and the resources contained in, on, or above that physical property. The following principles outline the property rights principles CPR applies in assessing the merits of policy matters relating to ownership and use of public lands.*

- There should be good reason for government owning certain physical property. Government holdings of land must serve an important, demonstrable public good, such as the preservation of a battlefield as an important historic site and an irreplaceable national treasure. Government ownership of land reduces the amount of land available for private users, thus raising the price of the land and depriving some individuals of the ability to own property. Public lands policy should operate based on the normative principles that land is usually best cared for under private ownership and public land usually best serves the public when its resources are put to productive use by private-sector entities.
- Public land policy should generally be inclined toward the divestiture of land holdings to private parties, especially of land with commercial value. The Bureau of Economic Analysis estimates the federal government's land holdings as worth some \$1.9 trillion. While it may not be possible to sell off all the land, with the national debt over \$50 trillion, the federal government has a responsibility to sell off portions of its vast land holdings. Conservation concerns can be addressed by transferring ownership of certain holdings to private trusts to manage the lands as nature preserves and parks that the public can use for recreation.
- Public land holdings and use policies should promote the free market and property rights. When government owns land, the use of resources located on and within the land is determined through a political and bureaucratic process instead of the free market. This leads to inefficient use of the resources. As with all cases of politicized allocation of resources, this process benefits those who are best at currying favor with politicians and bureaucrats, not necessarily those who can most efficiently use the resources to satisfy consumers (in other words, the public). Public lands policies should thus incorporate market-based approaches so as to minimize the distortion of the market, ascertainment of best use, and the right price to charge for the land or use of the land.
- Public lands policies should mitigate adverse effects on state and local jurisdictions. Federal land holdings undermine federalism by turning states where the federal government is a major land holder into wards of the federal government. Large federal land holdings shrink state and local governments' tax bases, making them more reliant on Washington. State governments cannot tax federally owned lands; thus, they must rely on federal payments to compensate for the lost revenue. Because state and local programs should be funded at the state and local level, the federal government should begin divesting land holdings in the five states where it is the largest land owner and the six states in which it controls more than 30 percent of the land.