

US Senator Maria Cantwell

Virtual Press Conference Protesting Proposed Public Lands Sell Off

June 24th, 2025

Opening Remarks

[[VIDEO](#)]

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you so much, and thank you to all of our guests who are participating in this virtual press conference at a critical moment in our country's history. I'm joined today by climbers, hunting and fishing advocates, outdoor recreation retailers, to say loudly and clearly that America's public lands are not for sale. I would not be fighting for this unless everybody really understood that our economy in the Pacific Northwest, and certainly the U.S. economy, has a thriving \$1.2 trillion outdoor retail economy and over 5 million in recreational jobs.

So it's easy to say that the value of our public lands has also created a great economy. And why I'm honored to be joined by professionals like professional climber Tommy Caldwell and Graham Zimmerman; Mayor of Boise, Idaho, Lauren McLean; REI executive and Outdoor Industry Association board member Susan Viscon and Kaden McArthur, representing the Backcountry Hunters and Anglers.

So these are the people who know well about the livelihood that I referred to. The proposal we've seen so far would mandate a sale of two to three million acres of Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management [land] all across the west and it would make up to 250 million acres of public lands eligible to be sold across the West.

Every Western State -- that is except for Montana, because somehow there's a "Big Sky Swindle" in the deal -- there's no Republican that has said: "Public lands are off the off the radar here, and we won't allow you to sell any," except for one Republican who stood up and instead of saying that and saying that public land shouldn't be for sale, basically just got himself a carve out. So as far as I'm concerned, it's a Big Sky Swindle.

Every other Western state, we're here to say that we want our public lands protected. We want to be able to continue to hike, fish, hunt and do as much as we can. We don't want hunters to face a "no trespassing" sign on lands that they've hunted on for generations. We don't want anglers to be blocked from world class fishing grounds. We don't want places that climbers and hikers and outdoor recreationists have gone to for years all of a sudden to be turned into luxury resorts or golf courses. They are at their highest and best use, and they are beautiful places that have been preserved for all of the American people to enjoy.

So while I appreciate that Senator Lee has been forced to backpedal and is reportedly now trying to shrink the number of available access to these acres, I don't trust him, and I don't trust this process. We will be here to the very last minute making sure that they do not succeed in putting this into a bill, and if they do, we will be there with an amendment fighting it tooth and nail on the Senate floor.

Public lands under this administration are under attack. President Trump said in an executive order, Interior Secretary Burgum said at our public lands meeting that we had regarding the budget process for Interior that public lands are part of our nation's balance sheet. That means he thinks that they're on our balance sheet and should be up for sale. That's why we are here to say no sale of public lands is okay unless it goes through an already defined process.

Obviously, things like the Land and Water Conservation Fund and things that have been set up, we obviously improved access to Mount Rainier by doing a land purchase that was really a valuable asset, and there are some things, but no broad sale of our public lands. It's reported that Senator Lee has already sent a new land sale proposal to be included in the Republican budget proposal. We're waiting to hear how the parliamentarian rules on that. We know that they will be writing and rewriting this bill to the very last minute, Washington state could be impacted with a new proposal that would only sell BLM land.

For example, the Columbia Basin sagebrush provides some of the best hunting ground in the state. That land could be sold. The Methow Valley, which contributes \$150 million annually to Okanogan County's economy, has BLM land with a five-mile radius of Twisp. The BLM [land] lines the Columbia River where we go to recreate and enjoy the outdoors -- that could be sold to developers for a resort.

So I want to [say] something very important here too, that we do have a high housing crisis, but selling public land will not result in more housing. According to a recent study, selling off federal land, even if it's located near population centers, won't spur housing because there already are vast swaths currently available of land in the same area. So what is more likely to happen is that developers will buy up the choicest proposals and develop them for something else -- not affordable housing, something way more expensive. So we know that this proposal that we're fighting today is critically important to Americans all over the United States. We know it's part of our heritage and part of our system, and we know that this is a big no.

Our colleagues on the Republican side of the aisle should be making this clear, not getting a carve out for Montana, but clearly saying this is an unacceptable proposal, telling Leader Thune and the President of the United States to take it out right now. But we will continue to

fight until the very last i's are dotted and t's are crossed on this legislation and this proposal.

Now I'd like to turn it over to professional climber Tommy Caldwell, who we're all so admiring, Tommy of all your great contributions to the outdoors and your advocacy for the outdoor economy. Tommy.

Tommy Caldwell: Thank you so much, Senator, and thank you so much for being such a warrior for this cause and so many others that I deeply, deeply care about. I make my living as an outdoor recreationalist. I climb all over the world, and I'm really still trying to wrap my head around the actual land that's proposed to be sold off.

But as I really dig into it, I'm realizing that many of the most profound places in the outdoor climbing world are up for sale, believe it or not. Like the Buttermilks in Bishop, California. This is a place that I've spent vast numbers of time. It largely supports the economy of Bishop in the summer months. There's thousands of people that go climbing from all over the world in this place -- up for sale. Shelf road -- I spent my whole childhood at Shelf Road in Colorado -- that's up for sale. Ten Sleep, Wyoming -- the climbing there supports that town. This would vastly change what I do and my sport.

And I suppose in some ways, like if this money was going to go to help with our budget crisis, I could maybe understand making some compromises. But the fact that this is just funding tax cuts seems so crazy to me, and I just want the people on this call to know that this feels very scary and very insane to me. I live in Lake Tahoe nowadays, where I went hiking yesterday, is up for sale on Fallen Leaf Lake. The ski area that I skied at all winter, Kirkwood Ski Area with my kids -- that land and the land surrounding it is up for sale. Like, this is vast. It's not about housing.

Like, most of this stuff is so far from public centers that it's not functional for affordable housing. And so, this is a big deal to me and my community. And I thank you for giving me a moment to speak about it. And I'm here to do whatever I can to help block this.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Tommy, and thank you, thank you for all your great content creation around the outdoors. Really, really appreciate it. Next, we'll hear from Graham Zimmerman, lead of Protect Our Winters CLIMB Athlete Alliance, Graham, thank you for joining us.

Graham Zimmerman, Senator, thank you for having me, and I'll echo Tommy. Thank you so, so much for your leadership on public lands and so many other things that we care about.

So my name is Graham Zimmerman. I live in Bend, Oregon, and I grew up just north of Seattle, and for the past 20 years, I've been a professional mountain climber, having taken expeditions to places like the Pakistani Karakoram and the Patagonian Andes and it's fair to say, I think that those climbs have gone pretty well. We've received a bunch of awards and things like that, including the Piolets d'Or, which is the gold medal of alpine climbing.

And for me, my journey in climbing started here on American public lands. And these landscapes, they're my training grounds, they're my classroom. They are my inspiration. They've taught me how to climb, how to care for wild places, how to care for people and for the systems that sustain us. And that's why I care so much about what happens on these places now.

To kind of tell a story about public lands a little bit -- I've been climbing over the world but some of my proudest moments have been climbing here in the United States on our public lands. In 2013, my partners and I climbed a peak in the central Alaska Range called Mount Laurens. Took about 60 hours of nonstop climbing, and the climb was well received by the international climbing community. And it was a great reminder for me that our public lands are world class, and they are respected and admired far beyond our borders.

And these are also places where I've seen the climate crisis up close, where I've watched glaciers disappear, forests burn, and weather patterns grow more erratic, and now under budget reconciliation, these lands are being targeted, not only for development of expensive housing, like you were discussing, but also for oil and gas development. It's truly trading short term gains at the cost of long term damage. And we need to be clear that these public lands are not a spare part of our economy. They are the backbone of a \$1.2 trillion outdoor recreation sector, which it's worth noting that that is up 5% since 2022.

And it's a massive contributor to our economy. It's bigger than Big Pharma, it's larger than oil and gas, and it's a lifeline for the rural communities like mine and Ben that act as gateway communities. And these places power five million jobs across the country, supporting family livelihoods, and connecting us to something that is bigger than ourselves.

So, as you mentioned, I'm a part of Protect Our Winters, a community of over 200 professional athletes, one of whom is Tommy -- thank you, Tommy -- scientists, creatives and brands are also part of that network. And together, we advocate for the 180 million Americans who recreate outside each year. And we work to protect public lands, and we work to decarbonize so that we all have the future that we need.

And I also need to share that a big part of this for me is as a new parent. I have an eight month old daughter, little Sloan, and because of this, this fight is really personal. I want her

to grow up with the same access to clean air, wild landscapes, and public lands that have shaped who I am.

So, protect our public lands. Senator, thank you for your work, and thank you for your leadership, and for bringing us together to help work towards protecting this foundational component of what it means to be an American.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, thank you Graham, and thank you for participating. And congratulations on Sloan. And what a great legacy we're all fighting for her to have. So thank you so much.

We're now going to turn to Boise Mayor, Lauren McLean. Thank you so much, Mayor, for being with us.

Mayor McLean: Well, Senator, thanks for having me, and it's really good to see you. You know, it's funny to follow professional athletes, because I am not a professional athlete, but I am the Mayor of Boise. I'm also a mom of kids who my daughter when she was a week old, I slept her in on her first walk into public lands. She's 26 now, and she loves nothing more than to come home and bring friends and introduce them to the richness and depth of public lands in our community.

And the mom of a son who's 21 now. He was born in the winter. He was one month old when he got to sled in on his first adventure into public lands.

These lands shape us all, as Graham said now, about thinking about Sloan and what it means to be a parent and to live in a place that's blessed to be surrounded by public lands, but it shapes our communities. And as Mayor of the City of Boise, I'm looking out of my office right now at two distinct areas that are put at risk with this proposal to sell off public lands.

Just yesterday, a resident said, "Well, how can they sell them off? They're public. They belong to us."

That is the question we should all be asking, and that we've got to fight for. Our city is nestled up against foothills, open space that is BLM land that turns into Forest Service, land, up against a river and then against the desert. And for over 20 years, we have a legacy of putting forward ballot measures to protect these lands, so that they're saved in perpetuity for generations after us.

But the system that our residents have created that's right up against our downtown core is at risk because in this proposal, the sell off of lands would potentially block access to about 11% of the over 200 miles of trails that we have that leave from our city into open spaces. And we're looking at that potential loss of 11% -- just under 11% -- if BLM land

close to town sells because we've all seen it in western cities, when land goes private, access is cut off, we stand to lose so much more than what it might even sound like at the time.

And we've seen the dangers time and time again, especially as we have more risk of wildfire, of development in open spaces, in our woods, in our open spaces, and here at home in our foothills. And so the removal of lands, putting public lands in private hands, increases risks to our communities from wildfire, takes away the very culture and life that all of us that are communities right up against public lands rely on to get outside, to connect, to take advantage of what's in our backyard. It sells off things that belong to every one of us, even if you don't live in a western community.

And here in Boise in particular, these trails will be closed forever. After 25 years of deep work to ensure that we have access to open spaces and trails in perpetuity. This is a risk with this proposal.

So I appreciate your leadership. I appreciate the thousands of people in Boise and tens of thousands around the country that are taking action. We've got to keep at it because of the very real impacts that communities like mine will experience, but that ultimately all of us will experience. When we lose this land, it's gone forever.

Thank you. Thank you, Mayor, so well said. Thank you so much, and really putting a clear picture about exactly how it affects the city and the citizens of your community. I want to turn now to Susan Viscon, REI Co-Op executive and Outdoor Industry Association board member. Thank you for joining us, Susan.

Susan Viscon: Thank you, Senator Cantwell, for hosting this important call, and certainly all your work in protecting public land, especially in our home state of Washington. Some of my best memories were cross-country skiing with my one year old in a sled behind me in the Methow Valley, so it's terrible to think that these trails could be up for sale.

I've been at the Co-Op for a couple of decades now, and been involved with our work around public lands, and currently serve as a Chief New Ventures and Partnership Officer, that represents our advocacy work, and also a board member for OIA.

At REI, we believe time outside is fundamental to a life well lived, and the stories that you've just heard from Graham, Tommy, and Mayor McLean really reinforce the importance of that.

Protecting public lands, forests, and waters have been essential to our mission since our founding in 1938, and we really believe these natural places are where our members

connect to nature, also where our vendors and partners operate, and where the outdoor community thrives.

It is so critical that we remove this dangerous language about public lands from the reconciliation bill. Because really, as you heard, public lands belong to everyone.

You heard also about the \$1.2 trillion outdoor economy. I want to share that just in the American West, the outdoor industry represents more than \$177 billion in economic value and supports nearly 2 million jobs. If we sell off public lands, it threatens all of that. And really thinking about how small gateway communities could see this impact.

We had a study out of Eastern Kentucky University, talked about Lander, Wyoming, specifically, that community thrives on outdoor recreation. And climbing alone in that space generates \$4.5 million in annual visitor spend. It supports almost \$2 million in local wages, and nearly 30,000 climbers visit that per year. I know Tommy is one of those that goes to that special space.

REI, we have 12 million members in the Western states, and those members just don't shop, right? They're really out camping, hiking, paddling and climbing these lands every day. And for many of them, it's not just about iconic national parks, it's the trails that are right outside their back door.

I spent a decade living in Arizona, hiking and mountain biking in the incredible landscape of the Sedona Red Rocks and Coconino National Forest. Yesterday, access to those trails were on the selling block.

Losing this would be permanent loss of connection, belonging, and access for our members and the broader community. And protecting is so important. And this is bipartisan, the polls show that Americans overwhelmingly support protecting public lands.

And we see that in our own action, through our community action network, our members have already sent 200,000 messages to Congress saying that they must protect these lands. Senator Cantwell, I know you've received many of those, and thank you for the work you're doing around this.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you so much. Yeah, I was able to get out for a few hours yesterday morning at Mount Hamilton, which is in Beacon Rock Park down in Southwest Washington. So yep, very much appreciated that. A little bit of relief from all of this.

Our last speaker, before we turn to the press, will be Kaden McArthur, representative of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. Thank you so much for joining us.

Kaden McArthur: Thank you, Senator, for hosting this amazing group that highlights the wide range of interests in protecting access to our public lands.

Many sportsmen and women that I've spoken to across the country have been able to directly point to places at threat by this maneuver that they hunt and fish on, that they take their families to, that they use to enjoy the solace of the outdoors.

The latest proposal available to the public makes eligible for sale landscapes that I personally have hunted grouse, elk, mule deer, and pronghorn on, waterways that I fished for trout on since I was a kid with my family.

And the loss of public lands really can have significant impacts, regardless of proximity to existing communities and development. We hear a lot about this focus on affordable housing and really trying to, in theory, develop public lands closer to existing communities, but those landscapes, as they go away, will further crowd backcountry landscapes. You'll see more trucks at trailheads, you'll see more boots on the same trails as you.

And also, importantly, many big game species like mule deer, really strongly rely on low valley bottoms on the outskirts of existing communities for the winter range that keeps them alive during the heavy snowfalls and bad winters. And the loss of many of those low-lying habitats in public lands adjacent to existing communities can directly threaten the viability of those deer herds.

In addition to that, more than 80% of critical habitat for big game species like elk is found on public lands the United States. More than 50% of Blue Ribbon trout streams are found on public lands. In the United States, these landscapes are often vast and intact, and fragmenting them will have irreversible impacts for fish and wildlife, and of course, anyone in the outdoors that recreates, whether they're hunting, fishing, bird watching, and enjoying these intact ecosystems.

One talking point you might also hear in conversing about this maneuver, trying to sell off our public legacy and our public lands heritage, is that locations like national parks are exempt from these proposed sales, so this is only about so-called 'garden variety' public lands. Our national park system the United States is an incredible asset for the American people, but those lands are preserved in a manner that doesn't allow hunting, and so for the folks in our community, sportsmen and women that enjoy pursuing fish and game, it's these so-called 'garden variety' public lands that are really, almost, in many ways, more valuable than some of the other lands that are exempt from this proposal. And we're trying to make loud and clear to decision makers right now that just because it doesn't have a park status or a similar conservation status does not mean it is not invaluable to the public and to fish and wildlife.

At the end of the day, the loss of access is the number one reason that people in America stop hunting and fishing. There are millions of Americans who cannot afford to hunt on private land, cannot afford that access, whether it's their own property or leasing property from someone else, and taking this legacy and selling it off to the highest bidder is the most anti-American deal I can imagine. These public lands are a finite and perpetually undervalued resource, and the worth they have to the public and those that hunt and fish is only going to increase over time to us in future generations.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you so much.