

Statement for the Record
U.S. Department of the Interior
before the
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
H.R. 1620, Federal Land Asset Inventory Reform Act
May 3, 2012

Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to provide this statement for the record on H.R. 1620, the Federal Land Asset Inventory Reform Act. The Department has serious concerns with H.R. 1620, which would provide little new critical information about the lands the Federal government manages and would be prohibitively expensive to implement.

Background

According to the Congressional Research Service, the Federal government owns 635 to 640 million acres of the nearly 2.3 billion acres that constitute the United States. The largest land managers for the Federal government are the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture, Defense, and Energy. Within the Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Land Management administers approximately 245 million acres; the National Park Service manages approximately 80 million acres; the Fish and Wildlife Service manages approximately 150 million acres as part of the Refuge System; and the Bureau of Reclamation manages 8.7 million acres associated with Bureau of Reclamation projects. The U.S. Forest Service, in the Department of Agriculture, manages approximately 193 million acres. Approximately 27.9 million acres in the United States are managed by the Department of Defense. Additionally, hundreds of thousands of buildings and structures are managed by a multitude of Federal agencies.

H.R. 1620

H.R. 1620 requires the Secretary of the Interior to undertake a multipurpose cadastre of all Federal real property, defined as real estate “consisting of land, buildings, crops, forests, or other resources.” The bill defines cadastre as an inventory of the real property of the Federal government including information about the “use, value, assets and infrastructure of each parcel.” The bill further requires the Secretary to determine which properties “can be better managed through ownership by a non-Federal entity.”

The cost of this type of a detailed inventory of Federal real property called for in H.R. 1620 would be prohibitive. A very rough estimate suggests that the cost could run in the many billions of dollars.

Some of the requirements in H.R. 1620 are duplicative of other work and reports done by Federal agencies. One example is a comprehensive review of the Federal government’s oil and gas resources which was required by the Energy Policy Conservation Act of 2000 (EPCA), Public Law 106-469. The final phase of the multi-agency EPCA report was completed in 2008.

H.R. 1620 also requires that as part of the cadastre, a review be done to determine which lands could be better managed by a non-Federal entity. For the BLM, for instance, this would be a costly process that would duplicate work already being done by individual BLM field offices.

Many of the decisions about how best to manage the public lands entrusted to the BLM's management are made through 157 individual Resource Management Plans (RMPs) which are developed with full public participation at the local level. These RMPs provide the foundation for every on-the-ground action taken or authorized by the BLM, and include an inventory and assessment of a broad range of resource values and public land uses. Among the many decisions made through the RMP process is the identification of lands that are potentially available for disposal. Extensive public involvement in this process is critical. H.R. 1620 appears to substitute the judgment of officials in Washington, D.C. for decisions made on the ground by local field managers, through an open and inclusive public process. The Department has serious concerns with H.R. 1620 because of the likely costly and duplicative process of identifying lands for disposal established by this bill.

The Department of the Interior is aware of and appreciates the concerns expressed by some Members of Congress about the accuracy of data on lands owned by the Federal government and specifically in the Department of the Interior. It is worth noting that the Federal government is making important strides in improving the accuracy, efficiency and level of data available on the Federal real property portfolio. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) recently established the Real Property Advisory Committee (RPAC) to work across agencies to determine real property best practices, opportunities for short and long-term cost savings, and realigning real property inventories to agency mission and service delivery.

Furthermore, in 2010, the BLM initiated a mineral and land records verification and validation program which is focused on developing a more accurate land inventory, and improving the level of data transparency and accountability. This will allow a more efficient and effective management of mineral and land records. Within a year the BLM expects to have this data available to the public through an easy-to-access online system.

Conclusion

The cost of the comprehensive inventory of Federal lands envisioned by H.R. 1620 would be prohibitive. The Department of the Interior believes that the redirection of funds away from accomplishing important projects and the jobs they create in areas of energy development, resource protection, recreation, and conservation is not the best use of taxpayer dollars.