

House Natural Resources Committee reviews long-standing federal land laws

May 24, 2017

The House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a hearing on May 24 to examine three major laws affecting the management of federal and tribal lands, as well as designated wilderness areas.

During the oversight hearing, members reviewed the government's implementation of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) (P.L. 94-579), which directs the Secretary of the Department of the Interior (DOI) to develop, maintain, and, when appropriate, revise public land use plans. Another bill under review was the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA) (P.L. 73-383), also known as the Wheeler-Howard Act or informally as the Indian New Deal. The IRA was enacted to reduce federal control of tribal lands by ending allotment – a policy authorizing the federal government to hold title to tribal lands in trust and distribute small pieces of land to individuals – and establishes a right to form tribal governments. Finally, the committee assessed the Wilderness Act of 1964 (P.L. 88-577), which establishes a National Wilderness Preservation System composed of federally owned “wilderness areas” as designated by Congress to preserve their natural resources for the use and enjoyment of the American people.

Representative Raúl Labrador (R-ID-1), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, released a memo explaining that certain federal actions to implement these laws have resulted in burdensome regulations and other negative consequences, which fall onto state and local governments and the American taxpayers. According to witness testimony from Celeste Maloy, Deputy County Attorney of Washington County, Utah, FLPMA requires agencies to cooperate with local governments and consider local land-use plans in developing their resource management plans (RMP). In her experience, however, stakeholders are briefed during public meetings but are not invited to participate and exchange information. Napa County Supervisor Diane Dillon noted the need for a fair federal process with clear standards that will enable tribes and counties to work together as partners. Additionally, Kendra Pinto, Counselor Chapter House Member for Nageezi, MI, expressed that Congress and federal agencies should update RMPs to strengthen protections for tribal lands and balance energy development with other land uses.

Sources: Government Publishing Office, House Committee on Natural Resources, Library of Congress, National Parks Service
