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The House Committee on Natural Resources held a field hearing, entitled “Energy and Education: What’s the Connection,” on August 29, 2018, in Roosevelt, Utah. Chairman Rob Bishop (R-UT-1) led the hearing, which considered testimony from two panels of local stakeholders and aimed to explore energy development on federal lands as a potential revenue source for public education.

According to the Republican committee staff, overly burdensome federal leasing and regulatory requirements have “discouraged greater development, resulting in lost revenue for the federal government and States and jeopardizing greater investment in education.”

Chairman Bishop, who spent 28 years as a classroom teacher before entering politics, began the hearing by outlining the importance of the hearing’s theme to the lives of Utahns. Utah is currently ranked last in educational expenditures per pupil according to a Department of Education report released in January 2018. In fiscal year 2015, Utah spent \$6,751 per student compared to \$20,744 in New York, though Chairman Bishop noted that spending does not always equate to quality education. Chairman Bishop noted a correlation between states with large amounts of public lands, mostly in the western United States, and lower per capita student spending. Approximately sixty-three percent of land in Utah is owned and managed by the federal government, leaving fewer sources of potential local revenue for education, according to Chairman Bishop.

The first panel featured Spencer Stokes from the Utah State School Board; Jeff Hanke, a social studies teacher at Union High School; and two students. The second panel featured Shaun Chapoose, a Ute Tribal Councilman, alongside two county commissioners and representatives from the Western Energy Alliance and the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration.

The panelists largely agreed with Chairman Bishop’s call to open up federal lands to energy development for the purpose of increasing funding to public schools. Stokes called for the state to manage or take back federal lands directly. He noted that the large swaths of federal land in areas such as the Uinta Basin – a major oil- and gas-producing region – make it very difficult for the state to obtain revenue from energy production for education.

Chapoose urged the group to consider other reasons for low education budgets in Utah, citing Utah’s low property taxes as an under-tapped source of revenue. He suggested that the meeting members and Utah politicians were unfairly blaming the federal government for the misallocation of educational funding. “Funding our schools is not a federal land or energy problem. It is a property tax problem. It is also a problem with how state revenues are distributed,” Chapoose said. “Chairman Bishop and some members of the committee want you to believe that federal lands are the problem. That’s not true.”

Sources: House Committee on Natural Resources; National Center for Education Statistics.
