



June 18, 2025

Senator Mark Kelly
516 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Kelly,

On behalf of our members, supporters, volunteers, local businesses, communities, outdoor recreationists, and the many stewardship partners of Wild Arizona and the Arizona Trail Association, we urgently ask you to strongly oppose Senator Mike Lee's amendment for the sell off, transfer, privatization, high density development, and industrialization of federal public lands currently in the Senate version of the FY 2026 Budget Reconciliation Bill. The sale of up to 3.3 millions of acres of wildlands, wildlife and waterways constitutes an incomprehensible betrayal of the public trust and will transform the West as we know it. Even worse, the measure eliminates public input and environmental review that would mitigate disastrous effects on lands that belong to all Americans.

We are honored to provide information and perspectives about this amendment's potential impacts, and we request you impress on fellow senators from the 11 targeted western states the appalling scale of this unprecedented threat, as well as the breadth and depth of public opposition. The Lee amendment poses permanent and irreversible harm to our treasured heritage, including vital sources of clean water and air, recreational access, healing for military veterans, cultural landscapes, and western lifestyles essential to all Arizonans and Americans, today and for future generations.

The amendment text claims to be directed at solving a housing crisis, while it goes on to reveal a shockingly swift and sweeping transfer of public lands for private profit, and to subsidize tax relief for the wealthiest Americans. Most cities and towns in Arizona and all across the west have prioritized development as infilling within current city and town limits rather than expanding development ever further into the urban/wildland interface. The critical needs for housing and especially affordable housing are where people have easy access to infrastructure, transportation, services, shopping, employment, schools and community gathering places. Even if additional housing were actually the anticipated result, a greatly expanded urban/wildland interface inherently exacerbates the difficulties and conflicts these areas hold between the natural and human made worlds, such as catastrophic wildfire, dangerous interactions with wildlife, increased erosion, and damaging floods.

Additionally, there are 9 million acres of State Trust Land in Arizona available for sale at auction to the highest bidder, and the majority of these lands are located within closer proximity to towns and cities than federally managed lands. These State Trust Lands were transferred from federal control when Arizona gained statehood in 1912 for the benefit of state schools and agencies. To date, less than 19% of lands originally transferred to the state have been sold. The affordable housing crisis can be solved through the current State Lands system, not through the sale of our treasured public resources.

Public lands in Arizona and across the west are immensely popular, and central to their popularity and use are the networks of trail systems, which provide access to the hunting, fishing, hiking, running, backpacking, mountain biking, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, and other nature immersion activities that define our western way of life. Communities across Arizona have come together to plan, design, advocate, help fund, build and steward local and regional trail systems, which connect urban and rural open space and parks to the wild natural areas of adjacent public lands. The trails also act as fire breaks, and provide access to remote areas when wildland firefighters are responding to emergencies. Trail activities also infuse billions of dollars into Arizona's economy, supporting rural communities and preserving nearby natural resources.

From rural towns, communities, and smaller cities, to major metropolitan areas, people are drawn to live where there is access to their public lands, which in turn shape the character of these places and forge the unique identities of the residents of mountain towns, desert cities, and redrock canyon villages. Private development of these lands described in the amendment means cutting off access to, and even eliminating sections of popular trail systems. Even in the case of Congressionally designated trails within the National Trails System, public lands outside of the trail management corridor could be sold to private interests where all public access would likely be terminated, and the values for which the trails were designated could be compromised.

Furthermore, if this proposal is included within the FY26 budget, it sets a dangerous precedent for future members of Congress to follow suit and sell public lands to fund whatever projects are identified as the priority of the day. Public lands are a public resource, and any sale of this resource should require review and approval from the American people. There are already mechanisms in place for this type of activity, including the Federal Land Policy & Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976. Let Senator Lee propose this as a standalone bill – not snuck into must-pass legislation, language that was already removed from the House budget due to overwhelming pressure from constituents.

Arizona's public lands are far more valuable as a public resource than a one-time revenue generator. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, outdoor recreation activities contribute \$14-18 billion to our state's economy. And in 2022, through a travel cost methodology study, the University of Arizona found the value of trails for Arizonans to be over \$8 billion. We cannot compromise this sustainable source of revenue generating economic activity, which is largely dependent upon public lands.

At this critical time in our nation's history, we are counting on you to make sound decisions that reflect the priorities of your constituents. A February 2025 poll from Colorado College found that 82% of residents in western states oppose the sale of public lands for housing development.

The poll also found that 9 in 10 voters regularly visited their public lands over the past year. This is not just a majority of voters – it's the vast majority.

Thank you for your service in the United States Senate, and for taking time to hear our concerns. Please reach out if you'd like additional information, personal stories, or other assets to support your efforts during budget negotiations.

Respectfully,



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