

Proposed Sell-Off of Public Lands Threatens Tribal Homelands and Sovereignty.

From the Public Lands Team and the Tribal and Indigenous Partnerships Strategy Team at the National Wildlife Federation - June 2025

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee has introduced a [sweeping proposal](#) that mandates the sale of 2-3 million acres of public land managed by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management across 11 western states. Many of these lands are ancestral homelands of numerous Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities, including places of deep religious, ecological, cultural, and historical importance. While Montana is exempt from the current proposal, the threat extends far beyond state boundaries. Indigenous People's connections to land are not confined by colonial lines-- many of the places listed for disposal are part of the sacred geographies of Indigenous Peoples across the West. Additionally, Tribal members have treaty rights to use public lands for hunting and fishing.

Why This Matters to Tribes

This proposal is alarming not only for its scale, but for its substance. The [legislation](#) says that lands to be sold can be nominated by "interested parties," but it is unclear whether this includes Tribes, corporations, wealthy landowners, or foreign interests. It is also unclear how and whether this decision would affect current and future co-management and co-stewardship agreements between Tribal communities and the federal government. It is difficult to determine what lands could be subject to disposal under this proposal. Further, Tribes are not mentioned as one of the parties allowed to purchase more than two tracts per sale, which would result in their blanket exclusion from most of the transactions involving the very land they have historically stewarded. The legislation will have serious implications for Tribal Nations, including provisions that:

- Undermine Tribal sovereignty by excluding Tribes from meaningful consultation that follows FPIC guidelines and best practices.
- Fragment critical big game and wildlife habitat, harm biodiversity, and negatively affect the climate resilience of communities and ecosystems.
- Threaten grazing lands critical to tribal ranchers - lands with existing grazing permits are not protected under this bill. This is a potential threat to Native business owners and tribal economies.
- Violate treaty rights for hunting, fishing and traditional uses of the lands and resources.



- Prohibit Tribes from reacquiring ancestral lands and cultural sites via a buyer limitation clause that excludes Tribes from the ability to purchase more than two tracts per sale.
- Undermine Tribal governments by offering first right of refusal to purchase to state and local governments (empowering state and local governments to purchase land despite Tribes' objections or hopes to purchase it themselves).

- Impede Tribal access to cultural sites and ancestral lands by implementing a sale system that favors private landowners adjacent to federal lands and state and local governments, and unfairly excludes Tribal interests.
- Bypass the government-to-government relationship and the consultation requirements that the federal government is legally and morally obligated to uphold and betray the trust relationship established between the two.

These provisions are a direct violation of the government-to-government relationship between Tribal Nations and the federal government and a continuation of harmful land policies that have dispossessed Indigenous Peoples for generations. At the National Wildlife Federation, we are committed to advancing Tribal land sovereignty, Tribal-led conservation, and co-stewardship as the path forward - not reckless land disposal that bypasses all public processes (Read NWF's public statement [here](#)). We believe that ancestral lands must be responsibly protected and restored, not sold off for development and to the highest bidder. Tribes must have first and full say in decisions about lands of cultural, ecological and religious significance, following the [principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent](#).

We rely on our members and partners like you to call your Senators and Representatives and urge them to vote NO on the measures to sell off our public lands.

The Public Lands Team and the TIPES Team at NWF.

