On June 15, the House Committee on Natural Resources passed two pieces of legislation that would, if signed into law, transfer control of large swaths of federally managed public lands from the Department of the Interior to individual states.

H.R. 3650, the Forest Management Act of 2015, would direct the Forest Service to convey up to two million acres of national forest land per state for the primary purpose of timber production.

H.R. 2316, known as the Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act, would allow states to use national forest land to create ‘community forest demonstration areas’, which would be designated by an advisory board made up of industry stakeholders, recreational users, and local officials appointed by the governor.

These bills come in the wake of a numerous similar measures proposed in western states. In 2012, Utah passed a law requiring the federal government to cede control of over 30 million acres to state control, though the law has yet to be addressed in the courts. In 2015, ten other states proposed legislation seeking to transfer federal lands, supporting interstate compacts to facilitate land transfers, or funding studies to better understand the economic consequences and viability of such transfers. (A full list of policies by state can be found here).

Supporters of these measures cite concerns about improper forest management by federal officials and contend that state-level management is a more effective strategy. According to the National Association of State Foresters and some lawmakers, federal forest management practices have failed to maintain adequate forest health and have resulted in increased wildfires and insect epidemics.

Critics argue that such measures amount to a ‘public land heist’ that would result in public lands being sold off for private development, logging, and mining. Conservation and environmental groups such as Trout Unlimited, the Sierra Club, and the National Wildlife Federation have condemned the bills and argue that such policies would hinder outdoor recreation and weaken key federal environmental protections such as the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act.

According to Louis Geltman, policy counsel at the Outdoor Alliance, the primary concern is that states would be unable to afford the substantial costs of managing newly acquired forest land, including substantial firefighting expenses which are currently funded by the federal government. As a result, Geltman said, states would be under financial pressure to privatize the land for industrial development or find other ways to raise revenues such as logging or increased user fees which could negatively impact public access.