

**Statement for the Record
U.S. Department of the Interior
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands**

**Legislative Hearing on
H.R. 528, Post-Disaster Reforestation and Restoration Act of 2025
H.R. 1276, To remove restrictions from a parcel of land in Paducah, Kentucky
H.R. 2876, University of Utah Research Park Act**

April 29, 2025

Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, the Department of the Interior is pleased to provide this statement for the record on the following legislation: H.R. 528, Post-Disaster Reforestation and Restoration Act of 2025; H.R. 1276, To remove restrictions from a parcel of land in Paducah, Kentucky; and H.R. 2876, University of Utah Research Park Act.

H.R. 528, Post-Disaster Reforestation and Restoration Act

H.R. 528 requires the Department of the Interior (Department), in coordination with states, local governments, and Tribes, to identify lands requiring reforestation and restoration following “unplanned disturbances” (e.g., natural disasters) that are unlikely to recover without intervention. The Department is further directed to propose a list of priority projects for reforestation and restoration for each fiscal year, which may be carried out through grants, contracts, and cooperative agreements. H.R. 528 requires annual reporting to Congress including an accounting of all covered lands requiring reforestation and restoration; priority projects; grants, contracts, and cooperative agreements supporting priority projects; and recommendations on any implementation gaps. The Department strongly supports the intent of the bill to address post-disaster reforestation and restoration and defers to the Forest Service on aspects of the bill that pertain to them.

In his first term, President Trump signed legislation providing the single largest investment in America’s national parks and public lands in history, as well as legislation to improve the funding process for the Forest Service and the Department’s wildfire suppression operations. President Trump’s actions improved national parks and public lands for the American people, while improving forest management and wildfire suppression to protect communities and natural resources – all while greatly benefitting our Nation’s economy.

Today, numerous, severe threats to American landscapes continue to escalate in size, frequency, and intensity. Uncharacteristic wildfire, insect infestations, diseases, drought, flooding, and invasive species endanger public lands and create a need for reforestation and restoration. Wildfires alone destroy communities, infrastructure, and resources that are critical to the Nation’s security, prosperity, and well-being. They can cause complex problems, from severe loss of vegetation and soil erosion to a decrease in water quality and possible flash flooding. The

Department's approach to wildfire recovery is similar to the approach taken by the bill to address reforestation and restoration following natural disasters, and notes that many post-disaster reforestation efforts are currently addressed through existing forestry programs and forestry program funding.

The Department facilitates post-fire recovery through the Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) program. The BAER program determines the need for, prescribes, and implements post-fire emergency stabilization to protect public safety, minimize threats to property, and prevent further degradation of the landscape. BAER assessment plans and implementation are often a cooperative effort between federal agencies (Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Geological Survey), and state, Tribal and local forestry and emergency management departments.

In some cases, the Department may provide additional funding through the Burned Area Rehabilitation (BAR) program for up to five years after containment to repair or improve fire-damaged lands that are unlikely to naturally recover. The Department's firefighting bureaus utilize BAR funds to support the recovery process and provide a "bridge" to long-term restoration. Allocation of BAR funds involves a rigorous and competitive process to evaluate projects to ensure the most critical areas receive treatment first.

The Department has successfully used BAER and BAR to support immediate and long-term reforestation and restoration needs and welcomes the opportunity to expand its capacity to address the impacts of other natural disasters on communities and natural resources. To maximize efficiency, the Department also recommends reducing the proposed reporting requirements of the bill.

Finally, the Department notes that the text of H.R. 528 passed the House of Representatives as part of H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, sponsored by House Natural Resources Chairman Westerman. We support these efforts and look forward to continuing to work with the Committee to improve forest and rangeland management and aid in efforts to protect homes and infrastructure from natural disaster.

H.R. 1276, To remove restrictions from a parcel of land in Paducah, Kentucky

H.R. 1276 directs the Secretary to undertake action to remove deed restrictions from a land parcel transferred to the City of Paducah, Kentucky through the National Park Service's Federal Lands to Parks program. Through this public-benefit conveyance program, the National Park Service partners with the U.S. General Services Administration to transfer surplus Federal real property to state and local governments for public parks and recreation use while saving taxpayer dollars by reducing the Federal inventory of unneeded Federal land and facilities. Removing these restrictions would allow the City to sell or repurpose the land for purposes other than public recreation. The Department looks forward to working with the bill sponsor on this legislation to meet the community's needs.

H.R. 2876, University of Utah Research Park Act

H.R. 2876, the University of Utah Research Park Act, confirms the use of certain federal lands for public purposes on a 593-acre parcel in Salt Lake City, Utah. The Department supports the bill's goal of providing certainty regarding the current and potential uses of the parcel, and we support removing the federal interest in the parcel.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) regularly transfers public land to local governments and nonprofits for a variety of public purposes pursuant to the Recreation and Public Purposes (R&PP) Act and other statutes. The R&PP Act, and other similar legislation directing such conveyances, generally require that the transferred lands must be used for the specific authorized public purposes or revert to the federal government.

In the 1930s, the U.S. Department of the Army decommissioned Fort Douglas near Salt Lake City, Utah, and transferred ownership of this property to the Department. On October 18, 1968, the BLM issued a R&PP patent to the University of Utah (University), numbered 43-99-0012, "for purposes of academic expansion of the University of Utah, in Salt Lake City Utah, for an arboretum, and for highway and utility rights-of-way to serve those purposes." Today, the lands identified in H.R. 2876 – commonly referred to as "Research Park" – contain a complex of technology, education, and medical buildings, among other uses. Over the years, the University has approached the BLM to request additional uses on the property, which in some cases were for uses not allowed under the R&PP Act.

H.R. 2876, the University of Utah Research Park Act, would affirm that uses of the parcel by the University, as approved by the letter from the Secretary of the Interior to the University dated December 10, 1970, and any modifications of the approved plan of development and management approved by the Department prior to the date of enactment of this Act, are valid public purposes consistent with the requirements of the R&PP Act. Additionally, the bill provides that other uses of the parcel by the University that are consistent with use as a University research park and related university purposes, including development of student housing and a transit hub, are valid public purposes consistent with the R&PP Act.

The Department supports the bill's goal to facilitate development and use of the parcel by the University. Previous legislative efforts to address the development and use of this parcel have sought to release the reversionary interest held by the United States. The Department notes that the sponsor may consider a similar approach in this bill to permanently remove the federal interest in the parcel and achieve the sponsor's objective, and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue further.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this Statement for the Record.