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When Uncle Sam owns the land

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What would you do if a neighbor's tree falls on your house and causes a thousand dollars of damage? You would ask your neighbor to pay for the damage, and the law would require that he or his insurance pay the cost of the damage. Likewise, if your neighbor keeps hazardous materials on the edge of his property, such as dead trees and brush, and if they catch fire and burn down your house, you would have legal recourse.

But what happens if your negligent neighbor happens to be the government? You may be out of luck because the government may choose not to compensate you or allow you to sue it.

As the California fires have just illustrated, the questions raised above are now all too real for the thousands of families whose homes burned down needlessly, because of the negligence of the government in its stewardship of the land it owns. We know the government had allowed highly flammable brush to build up and failed to clear it, which would have been the responsible thing to do. We also know the government allowed bark beetles to kill millions of trees on the government land, and then failed to remove the dead trees, creating an additional hazard.

In many states, if a private landowner behaved in such a reckless and negligent manner, neighboring private owners would have a right to bring action in a court of law for redress. Contrast the way both large and small timber owners manage their land vs. the way the federal government manages its lands.

Most often, private landowners work to minimize the chances of fire damage by removing dangerous brush and dead trees. They also seek to protect their lands against the ravages of insects. As a result, most catastrophic fires occur on government rather than private lands because private owners have a strong financial interest in protecting their land.

Remember a few years ago during the Clinton administration when the Forest Service set a fire in New Mexico that burned down hundreds of buildings and homes and thousands of acres near Los Alamos? Was anyone punished, jailed or fined? I don't think so. Did anyone even lose his or her job?

If a private corporation had engaged in such reckless behavior, the environmentalists and others would be demanding the corporate officers go to jail and millions, if not billions, would be paid in fines and compensation. As you may recall, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, who had the overall responsibility for the disaster, was not fired, fined or even reprimanded.

This double standard of holding people responsible and accountable means every land owner is in much greater danger from physical or financial loss when the government, rather than a private party, is his neighbor.

Environmentalists are endlessly seeking to get the government to buy, seize or control more private land under the bogus argument that the government will "protect" it. Government ownership and control of the land is nothing more than socialism. For 200 years, virtually every socialist experiment has failed because when everyone owns something, no one does. Hence, no one can be held responsible for what is held as a collective, and ultimately it will be improperly used and damaged.

The government already owns 40 percentage of the land in the U.S. and in many Western states, such as California, it owns more than a half.

Government-owned land is removed from the tax base, so it not only costs everyone to maintain it but the government also loses tax revenue. When land is removed from private use by government ownership or unreasonable use restrictions, it reduces the supply of land, thus driving up housing prices.

These government-induced housing price increases make it more difficult for young and lower-income people to acquire homes, and thus lowers the standard of living for most people. Artificially high land prices, resulting from government supply restrictions, also drive up the price of agricultural land that, in turn, drives up the price of food.

Environmentalists also demand that vast tracks of land be put into wilderness areas without roads and prohibit vehicles of any sort. Such policies have a romantic appeal, but are both dangerous and discriminatory. They are dangerous in that denial of all mechanized access makes both rescue of people and protection of the land most difficult. It is discriminatory because it denies the right of all but the most hardy to enjoy the scenic and other environmental wonders of the locked-up land. The very young, the elderly and disabled are shut out.

The next time someone tells you the government should own more land rather than less, just think a moment and ask yourself: "Will the land be better taken care of by someone with a vested interest in making it more valuable or some organization where no one takes responsibility?"

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