



Government eyes ranchland, while wealthy magnates buy out ranchers.

by Fred Minnick

**T**ake a good look at your property. Every blade of grass, fence and building — it all represents you, your toil and your legacy to America. The land feeds your cattle, nourishes your children and gives your eyes beautiful horizons on which the sun sprays its bountiful energy.

How would you feel if somebody snatched this land?

The tire swing gone. The pecan tree chopped down. Goodbye alfalfa test plots. Your property now belongs to the government.

Land rights activists say “government landgrabs” have become so commonplace that “you don’t notice it until you wake up one day and you have a ghost town and you wonder why it happened. . . . towns like Elko, Nev., and some of the towns in northern Nevada where they’re buying a whole bunch of ranches,” says Chuck Cushman, founder of the American Land Rights Association, who fought the National Park Service in 1972 to keep his cabin from becoming a part of Yosemite National Park.

“Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) passed a bill to sell land around Las Vegas, but the money was to go to buy land in northern Nevada,” Cushman says. “What Harry Reid was really doing was using the money to get rid of his enemies, because the ranchers didn’t like him. So he used the money from Las Vegas to buy out all the ranchers up on northern Nevada.”

Cushman believes a similar scenario threatens ranchers who have land near the Mississippi River — a house bill that passed the House of Representatives in early December 2007 and should appear on the Senate floor sometime in 2008. HR 3998, or the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Extension Study Act, which passed 326 to 79, authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to conduct special resources studies of certain lands and structures to determine the appropriate means for preservation, use and management of the resources associated with such lands. But Cushman says the study could affect a lot of land.

“It’s a study bill, but it starts down the slippery slope,” he says.

If passed, Cushman says, the act will study valleys around Los Angeles with about 158,000 landowners, a section in Ventura County with 11,000 landowners, and the Mississippi River Trail.

“Don’t be confused by [the] trail reference. That means a whole bunch of land on each side of the river,” he says of a trail that would span from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. “Since an awful lot of development in the states in the Mississippi area occurs near the river, what you’re going to find is a huge amount of landowners who are going to be impacted by land acquisition regulation by the National Park Service if this bill moves forward.”

#### **But it’s a study bill, right?**

Natalie Luna, a spokesperson for Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.) who sponsored the bill, says the act will not result in any changes in current land management. She says it’s just a study bill.

“There hasn’t been any opposition of it,” Luna says. “I have not heard of any opposition in the Senate, but again, it’s just a study bill. There’s not going to be any private property rights taken away. It’s just to study the areas.”

While it seems this particular bill’s intentions are up for debate, the fact the government can seize land through eminent domain is not. Eminent domain refers to the power possessed by the state over all property within the state, specifically its power to appropriate property for a public use, according to legal expert and attorney Aaron Larson. The Supreme Court reaffirmed the eminent domain precedent ruling in 2005, causing a stir among private landowners. But some cattle ranchers believe there’s a place for this government right.

Wayne Allen, an Angus producer near Bloomfield, Iowa, and a member of the Iowa Angus Association, says the government’s acquiring of land for the good of the people should be a case-by-case decision and that it’s not inherently bad.

“In some cases, it might be justified,” Allen says.

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Alex Gardner, manager of Little Creek Farm in Starkville, Miss., which produces Fleckvieh, Simmental and Red Angus, agrees with Allen in that eminent domain is justified in some circumstances. But both Gardner and Allen say government seizures are not the problem; the real issue lies with out-of-state developers buying huge chunks of farmland to build subdivisions.

“And that’s frustrating,” Gardner says. “That drives land prices up, and the farmer can’t afford to pay what those people are paying to develop those areas.”

### **Billionaire buyers**

Media mogul and multibillionaire Ted Turner has become America’s largest private landowner. He owns land in 11 states, including New Mexico, Nebraska, Montana and South Dakota.

At a recent land auction in Nebraska, Turner purchased 26,300 acres for \$10 million.

“It hasn’t taken long to find out he’s serious,” Duane Kime, a rancher and Turner neighbor, told *The Associated Press* (AP).

Some ranchers worry about Turner’s intentions.

“With him it’s such a concern,” Cindy Weller, who lives on the family ranch near Mullen, Neb., told AP. “You don’t know what his plan is and what he’s going to do. . . . The entire way of life here is threatened, and it’s not just Turner, but he’s one reason. The whole area is economically depressed.”

And it’s not just Turner making these big deals, buying out ranchers. In 2006, billionaire developer Tim Blixseth paid \$3.8 million for a chunk of Wyoming ranchland to develop a golf resort. And former presidential candidate and publisher of *Forbes* magazine Steve Forbes recently sold his Colorado ranch for \$175 million to billionaire hedge fund manager Louis Moore Bacon.

All these big-money deals in remote areas are making other billionaires want to buy large plots and are driving up land cost, says Jeremy Seidlitz, executive director of the Montana Cattlemen’s Association.

In Montana, out-of-state multimillionaires are gobbling up large chunks of land in western Montana and

building “bazillion-dollar trophy homes,” he says.

When Seidlitz was a kid, farmers and ranchers had property in Flat Head Lake, near the Canadian border, because the property was dirt-cheap, he says. Now, that area is attracting the big money and going for upwards of \$100,000 an acre.

He says cattle ranchers have been hurt by the economics of this trend, but they’re not ruined. In Montana, there’s been a big push for in-state migration; “folks heading from western Montana to eastern Montana, where the ground is the normal price.”

He says ranchers are selling their western land for an average of \$30,000 and buying eastern land for \$700 an acre.

“Eastern Montana: it’s pretty good for oil and raising cattle,” he says.

As for Allen, he’s watched his neighbors sell their Iowa land. But there’s never been the slightest temptation for this veteran rancher who is proud of his heritage. When asked for how much he’d sell his acreage, Allen says, “My land is not for sale, let’s put it that way.”

