

FEDERAL LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

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February 1, 2017

The Honorable Jason Chaffetz
2236 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Chaffetz,

On behalf of the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association (FLEOA), exclusively representing 26,000 federal agents and officers nationwide, including those from the United States Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, I am again writing to express our strong opposition to H.R. 622 – Local Enforcement for Local Lands Act. FLEOA vehemently disagrees with the position put forth in this legislation to turn the functions of federal law enforcement agencies over to local departments. One only needs to examine the history of each agency to see why this idea would open our public lands to abuse.

The Forest Service was officially created in 1905, and protecting our nation's forested lands has always been a top priority. It was Congress who as recently as 1993, while responding to issues of fraud concerning timber management, directed the Forest Service to develop a chain of command that stovepipes the agency's enforcement branch. Congress recognized the crucial mission of these men and women and ensured that they were able to efficiently and effectively perform their duties without persuasion or bias.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was created in 1946 and resource protection was an immediate and significant challenge. In 1971, Congress responded to the slaughter of wild horses by enacting the Wild Horses and Burros Act, which provided any employee designated by the Secretary of the Interior with arrest authority for violations of the act. The BLM was charged with such responsibility but lacked any enforcement personnel. The BLM requested that the FBI handle such enforcement but the FBI disagreed, instead determining that given the unique and potentially complex cases, that the BLM take responsibility for their own investigations.

Federal law enforcement officers are free from political pressures, whereas sheriffs are political entities. Conflicting priorities with their local constituents could adversely affect their ability to protect our national treasures. Rather than objectively enforcing laws, rules, and regulations pertaining to our public lands, you may have some sheriffs carrying out their own personal agendas or the agendas of their constituents.

Forest Service and BLM officers routinely handle highly complex cases pertaining to archaeological resources, timber theft, international drug trafficking, illegal immigration, wildlife poaching, and catastrophic wildfires. These investigations often span numerous jurisdictions from counties, to states, and even internationally. Local law enforcement simply lacks the authority and resources to investigate such broad cases. With escalating violent crime, threats from drug cartels, and the remoteness of certain regions, Congress should be prioritizing its resources towards strengthening the law enforcement functions of both these agencies rather than dismantling them.

This bill leads one to believe that state and local law enforcement authorities are “more rooted” in the local community, and therefore better suited to enforce federal laws. On the contrary, Forest Service and BLM officers are often stationed in remote and sparsely populated communities where local law enforcement has minimal, if any, officers assigned. The fact is that land management law enforcement officers have an extremely low rate of turnover and transfer. These officers embark on a lifelong career and become valuable assets to their local communities. To suggest that Forest Service and BLM officers have difficulties working with local law enforcement is simply not true. Many of these agency’s personnel hold deputizations from their local sheriff’s to assist in times of need. FLEOA would be happy to point out the numerous instances where these brave men and women have saved lives and apprehended very dangerous criminals.

This legislation will place both public and federal workers at risk. It will embolden those who view federal public lands as an intrusion on their constitutional rights. It will lead to further hostilities and encounters such as those recently played out on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. We owe it to our nation’s citizens to provide them with safe and enjoyable public lands free of personal interests and agendas. We owe it to our federal land management employees to provide them with a safe working environment where they are able to manage our lands for future generations. It was President Theodore Roosevelt who stated, "The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, not impaired in value."

FLEOA understands that issues and problems may exist within the Forest Service and the BLM that may have led to the introduction of this bill. We also understand the heated conversation occurring over federal land ownership in the west. We cannot however, let our nation’s heroes take the fall for the policies and practices of the agencies for which they work. We owe them more. We owe them our support and appreciation.

Respectfully,

Nathan Catura

FLEOA National President

CC: The Honorable Members of the House of Representative’s Natural Resources Committee
The Honorable Members of the House of Representative’s Committee on Agriculture
The Honorable Mark Amodei, R-Nevada, Co-sponsor
The Honorable Mia Love, R-Utah, Co-sponsor
The Honorable Chris Stewart, R-Utah, Co-sponsor