

Writers on the Range: Outrage in Wyoming erupts over public land auction

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There's a 640-acre parcel of magnificent, state-owned public land in Wyoming that's set for auction unless the state changes its mind.

Simply put, this small inholding, known as the “Kelly Parcel,” should never be privatized—never. It is one of the most awe-inspiring and important pieces of open space remaining in America.

Within Grand Teton National Park, its borders include the National Elk Refuge and Bridger-Teton National Forest. Its value was appraised in 2022 at \$62.4 million. However, the director of the Office of State Lands and Investment just recommended a starting bid of \$80 million.

But its real value isn't about money: The land is a vital migration corridor for elk, moose, big horn sheep antelope, pronghorn and mule deer travelling into and out of the national park. It also hosts 87 other “Species of Greatest Conservation Need.”

And the annual, 200-mile-long migration corridor known as the Path of the Pronghorn—from Grand Teton National Park to the upper Green River Basin—passes right through the Kelly Parcel at the crux of what's recognized as the longest mammalian migration in the contiguous United States.

Wyomingites have been resolute in their opposition to selling the state-owned parcel. Publicity generated by the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance collected more than 2,600 comments from people opposed to an auction, and hundreds of opponents turned out at each of four public hearings in November. Many others contacted the state directly for a total of more than 10,000 people opposed to a state auction.

Yet this week the Wyoming State Board of Land Commissioners will decide whether a private owner gets to do whatever they want with the Kelly Parcel once they bid highest at auction— fence it, subdivide it, certainly road it.

With its iconic views of the Tetons and natural beauty that's surrounded by public land—plus sporting one of the most coveted zip codes in the country— the Kelly Parcel will most likely be snatched up at auction by a billionaire with development and dollar signs in their eyes.

“The people of Wyoming would not want to be part of a legacy where this land fell into a private developer's hands and see that beautiful landscape dotted with a few select starter castles,” said John Turner, former director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, at one of the hearings.

There is no rush to dispose of the Kelly Parcel, no deadline to cash in before the bank forecloses or a buyer backs out. But an auction changes everything, in a way that can never be undone.

That is why Dave Sollitt, executive director of the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance is asking The State Board of Land Commissioners to put a stop to this auction and focus on working with state legislators to find a way to sell the Kelly Parcel to Grand Teton National Park, where it belongs.

“National parks are heralded as ‘America's best idea,’ and auctioning off public land within Grand Teton National Park would stand out as Wyoming's worst idea,” Sollitt said. “If they go to auction, the state and everyone loses control. That's how auctions work.”

Though money generated from auctioning the Kelly Parcel to the highest bidder would contribute some \$4 million annually to the support of public schools, the windfall to the state would also come at an immeasurable cost to wildlife.

There is a better approach. Selling the parcel to the National Park Service—as Wyoming did with its other three parcels within the park—is projected to generate up to \$120 million over 30 years. The National Park Service tried to buy the Kelly Parcel in 2015, but the agency lacked enough money to make the deal then and now.

Establishing ourselves as the first state to auction off public land within a national park is likely to blight Wyoming's reputation beyond recovery. It should be clear: Privatizing an irreplaceable area within a national park for short-term gain is a foolish and destructive move.

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