

News

From _____

CONGRESSMAN

Nick Rahall

WEST VIRGINIA-4th DISTRICT

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RAHALL BILL TO STOP SALE OF FEDERAL LANDS PASSED BY HOUSE

Washington, D.C. -- The U.S. House of Representatives today passed a bill sponsored by Rep. Nick Rahall (D-WV) to prohibit the federal government from transferring 270,000 acres of energy rich public lands to private corporate interests at \$2.50 per acre.

"The Interior Department is trying to sell champagne lands at cheap beer prices," Rahall said. "Under the guise of a turn-of-the century mining law, 270,000 acres of federal oil shale lands are being virtually given away for a paltry \$2.50 per acre."

"You can buy an acre of prime federal land for less than it would cost for a six-pack of cheap beer," Rahall remarked.

Rahall's bill, which came out of his subcommittee on Mining and Natural Resources earlier this year, came in response to the Interior Department's give-away of 82,000 acres of federal oil shale land last fall to several large oil companies. While the department estimated these lands to be worth \$164 million, at \$2.50 per acre the sale brought in only \$205,000. According to Rahall, last year's sale was conducted "under the cloak of darkness with no prior consultation with Congress."

After learning about it, Rahall drafted legislation to stop any further give-away of publicly-owned energy lands. The bill, H.R. 1039, passed the House by a vote of 295-93.

"These are the people's lands, owned by all American citizens," Rahall observed. "It is hardly good stewardship by the Reagan Administration to sell public resources such as these off for such a paltry sum. I will not stand for this, and judging by today's vote, neither will my colleagues in the Democratically-controlled House."

The situation addressed by the legislation involves federal lands on which claims for oil shale were staked prior to 1920. Under the old mining laws, if a mining claim is found to be valid title to the land, it could be obtained for \$2.50 per acre. Over 66 years later, the holders of these claims have yet to take the first step toward showing they are valid, obtaining title or developing the shale oil.

During debate on the bill, Rahall said, "At some point this matter must be put to rest because as long as these claims are out there, the lands are unencumbered, and are basically off-limits to other developments which might be in the public interest."

The bill will now go to the Senate for consideration.

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