



June 24, 2025

The Honorable John Thune
Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Democratic Leader
United States Senate
S-221, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mike Lee
Chairman
Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
United States Senate
304 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Martin Heinrich
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
United States Senate
304 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: concerns about public lands sales in budget reconciliation legislation

Dear Leader Thune, Leader Schumer, Chairman Lee and Ranking Member Heinrich:

I write today to respectfully request that provisions to arbitrarily sell public land in Washington and other western states not be included in the budget Reconciliation legislation the Senate is currently crafting. This method of disposing of federal land without a process to include meaningful input from local stakeholders – including federally recognized tribal governments with reserved Treaty rights – threatens the cultural and economic wellbeing of the Yakama Nation and our more than 11,000 enrolled members.

The Yakama Nation exercises direct jurisdiction over about 1.3 million acres in Central Washington, including the Yakama Reservation and multiple off-reservation trust allotments. Pursuant to its status as a sovereign Native Nation and its Treaty-reserved authority, the Yakama Nation works to protect all of the natural and cultural resources in Yakama Nation’s historic Treaty-territory, and to provide for the health, safety, and welfare of our members. We also regulate our members’ exercise of their Treaty-reserved rights off-reservation in our ceded lands, which comprise about 1/3 of the State of Washington, and at traditional use areas throughout the Northwest – many of these are areas in land managed and owned by federal agencies.

Arbitrarily selling Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service land to the highest bidder for development or other purposes would be a breach of the federal trust relationship that forms the foundation of the unique government-to-government relationship between the United States and the Yakama Nation.

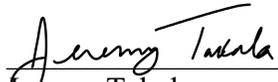
- **Violations of Treaty-Reserved Rights:** The Treaty of 1855, signed between the Yakama Nation and the United States (12 Stat. 951), explicitly reserved the rights of the Yakama people to hunt, fish, and gather traditional foods and resources within the Yakama Nation’s Treaty-territory, which includes the Yakama Reservation, ceded lands where Yakama Nation continues to exercise its jurisdiction, lands established as “usual and accustomed places”, and other lands of cultural and traditional importance frequented by our membership. These lands include vast areas that are currently managed by the BLM and U.S. Forest Service. Selling these lands to private entities for development or other purposes would

effectively block access to these traditional areas, making it impossible for Yakama citizens to exercise their inherent and legally protected treaty rights.

- **Loss of Access to Traditional Lands and Resources:** The Yakama Nation’s Treaty-territory once spanned a vast area, much larger than current Yakama Reservation. The lands managed by BLM and the Forest Service encompass many of these ancestral lands, which are vital for cultural practices, subsistence, and spiritual well-being. Privatization would fragment these landscapes, disrupting traditional hunting grounds, fishing sites along rivers and tributaries, berry and root gathering areas, and access to sacred sites. This loss of access directly undermines the Yakama way of life, which is deeply connected to the land and its resources.
- **Undermining of Tribal Sovereignty and Government-to-Government Relationship:** The United States has a trust responsibility and a government-to-government relationship with tribal nations. This means that decisions impacting tribal rights and lands should involve meaningful consultation and respect for tribal sovereignty. A blanket sale of public lands, especially without explicit provisions for tribal input, preference, or the ability to reacquire ancestral lands, would be a direct violation of this relationship and trust responsibility.
- **Threat to Cultural and Sacred Sites:** Many areas within BLM and Forest Service lands hold immense cultural and historical significance for the Yakama Nation, including burial grounds, ancient trails, and sites used for ceremonies. Many sacred sites are not isolated points on a map but often encompass entire landscapes, including mountains, valleys, rivers, springs, specific rock formations, and groves of trees. These areas are imbued with spiritual significance, often tied to creation stories, ancestral journeys, and ceremonies. Many Yakama ceremonies and traditional practices require direct access to specific sacred sites. Privatization opens these areas to development that could desecrate or destroy these irreplaceable cultural resources, further eroding the Yakama Nation’s heritage and identity as a people.
- **Environmental Degradation and Impact on Natural Resources:** Development on sold public lands could lead to habitat destruction, water pollution, and disruption of ecosystems. This directly impacts the very resources that our citizens rely upon for their Treaty-reserved rights and cultural practices. Many of the “first foods” central to Yakama culture – including huckleberries, camas, biscuitroot, and traditional medicines – grow in specific ecological conditions found on these public lands. Development would lead to the direct destruction of these plant communities.
- **Lack of Meaningful Tribal Consultation:** Reports indicate that the bill allows lands to be nominated by “interested parties” but it is unclear if this includes Indian tribes. Furthermore, it appears to bypass existing public input processes and consultation requirements that are crucial for ensuring tribal voices are heard in land management decisions. The proposed language in the Reconciliation bill appears to prioritize state and local governments for right of first refusal; however, the language only grants them first bid rights—not the power to prevent sales. Most state and local governments lack the resources to compete in bidding wars for federal lands. Notably, Indian tribes are excluded from this provision. Yakama Nation would be forced to compete in open auctions, even for tracts on our traditional homelands or containing sacred sites.

The proposed sale of BLM and Forest Service lands causes us great concern as it could readily undermine the Yakama Nation’s ability to maintain its cultural identity, sustain its traditional practices, and exercise rights that were explicitly reserved through solemn treaties with the United States. While we have the greatest respect for those who want to expand economic development and homeownership, the proposed language that has been released simply contains no balance or protection for our rights. We therefore urge that it not be included in the Reconciliation bill.

Sincerely,



Jeremy Takala

Chairman, Yakama Nation Tribal Council Legislative Committee