



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on March 18, 2025

Trump Admin Plans to Use Federal Land for Affordable Housing

Interior Secretary Doug Burgum and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Scott Turner announced a plan to tackle the nation's housing crisis. Their idea? Open underutilized federal land for residential development.

The Joint Task Force on Federal Land for Housing, [unveiled Monday](#), aims to boost supply and lower costs. It aligns with President Donald Trump's campaign promise to make home ownership more accessible. The administration argues that the federal government controls vast amounts of land that could be used for housing. Instead of letting it sit idle, why not turn some of it into homes?



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The Plan

In an op-ed for *The Wall Street Journal* titled "Federal Land Can Be Home Sweet Home," Burgum and Turner laid out their vision:

America needs more affordable housing, and the federal government can make it happen by making federal land available to build affordable housing stock.

The Interior Department oversees more than 500 million acres, much of it open land rather than protected forests or national parks.

The plan proposes transferring or leasing select parcels to states, local governments, and nonprofits to address housing needs. HUD will identify areas with the greatest need for affordable housing, while DOI will find suitable locations for development, considering environmental impact and any related restrictions:

Working together, our agencies can take inventory of underused federal properties, transfer or lease them to states or localities to address housing needs, and support the infrastructure required to make development viable — all while ensuring affordability remains at the core of the mission.

One of the biggest hurdles to development, according to Burgum and Turner, is red tape. The plan promises to streamline regulations to make federal land more accessible for housing:

Streamlining the regulatory process is a cornerstone of this partnership. Historically, building on federal land is a nightmare of red tape — lengthy environmental reviews,



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complex transfer protocols, and disjointed agency priorities. This partnership will cut through the bureaucracy.

The secretaries also stress local control. They maintain the federal government will not dictate where homes should go. Instead, they say state and local entities — “housing authorities, nonprofits, and local governments” — will take the lead.

The Real Problem: Housing or Jobs?

The administration argues that unlocking federal land will help struggling rural and tribal communities:

Overlooked rural and tribal communities will be a focus of this joint agreement. We are going to invest in America’s many forgotten communities.

But the problem in these areas isn’t a housing shortage — it’s jobs. Rural America has been losing people for decades as industries have moved to coastal cities or overseas. Mechanization in agriculture reduced labor demand, and as populations declined, schools and hospitals shut down. People didn’t leave due to a lack of housing — they left because there was no work.

At the same time, housing in many “flyover” states has remained far cheaper than in major metro areas. A quick search on Redfin shows homes in San Francisco, San Jose, Los Angeles, and Manhattan have median prices exceeding \$1 million, while in Cleveland and Milwaukee, prices are a fraction of that. Yet for years, demand in these areas remained low.

That changed in 2020, not due to local economic revival, but because pandemic-driven disruptions — supply-chain failures, inflation driven by government spending, and remote work — briefly pushed demand to rural areas. But these buyers were largely remote workers or retirees, not people driving local economies. Rural America didn’t decline because of housing costs — it declined because of economic stagnation.

The administration claims it will build where demand is highest, but most federal land is in the West — Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Arizona, and Wyoming — not where housing is unaffordable. Yet the worst shortages are in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., where federal land is scarce.

If cheap housing alone could revive communities, rural America wouldn’t have spent decades in decline. Housing follows jobs, not the other way around. Making more land available won’t fix the fundamental problem — without economic opportunity, people won’t move, and new developments will struggle to succeed.

Who Owns Federal Land?

The administration promises to cut red tape and make federal land available for housing, but there’s a fundamental problem: Federal land belongs to the American people, not the executive branch of the federal government. Only Congress has the authority to sell or transfer it. While the administration may streamline approvals and speed up leases, large-scale transfers remain legally questionable without congressional approval.

Without question, the federal government was never meant to permanently control vast expanses of land. As [The New American](#) has explained, the Founding Fathers saw federal land as temporary



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holdings to be transferred to settlers and, later, to new states. During the nation's founding, some of the original 13 states held claims to western lands, and those without argued that the federal government should hold the land only temporarily, not permanently.

Although the federal government has retained more land than originally intended, bypassing Congress to transfer even parts of it would be another mistake. The administration says land will go to states, local governments, and nonprofits, but that doesn't mean it will stay in public hands. Most states and cities rely on private developers to manage housing. If federal land is handed over, will it be developed as affordable housing, or will it be sold to developers? And if sold, what guarantees exist to keep it affordable?

If the administration believes federal land should be available for housing, the constitutional solution is straightforward: Work with Congress. A legislative approach would ensure transparency, accountability, and proper safeguards.

Existing Federal Programs

The U.S. government already funds multiple programs aimed at housing affordability. HUD's [Section 8](#) Housing Choice Vouchers subsidize rent for low-income families. [Public housing projects](#), managed by local authorities, provide government-owned rental units. The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit ([LIHTC](#)) incentivizes developers to build affordable housing.

Other programs include [FHA-backed loans](#), which help lower-income buyers secure mortgages, and [USDA rural housing loans](#) for homeownership in less populated areas.

However, these programs have been marred by issues of fraud, mismanagement, and corruption. Section 8 has faced bribery scandals, and [LIHTC fraud in Miami](#) resulted in \$36 million in stolen tax credits. Similarly, public housing projects such as [Thomasville Heights in Atlanta](#) fell into disrepair, and government partnerships with developers have often led to cost overruns and shady deals, as seen in [Chicago](#) and [Houston](#).

Despite these efforts — and their failures — affordability remains a challenge. This raises the question: Does more federal intervention help, or does it create new problems?

What “Affordable Housing” Actually Means

Politicians talk about “affordable housing,” but the term is misleading. It's a euphemism for low-cost, government-backed housing — essentially, cheap homes the market isn't producing on its own.

The administration argues that opening federal land will bring costs down. But land alone doesn't guarantee affordability. If homes are built where people don't want to live or where jobs are scarce, the issue remains. And if past government housing projects are any indication, there's a real risk that this plan will enrich developers, not lower costs for families.

The federal government has no obligation — or constitutional authority, for that matter — to make housing “affordable.” Instead, it should remove barriers, cut regulations, and let the market work.



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