


# A plan to transfer part of Louisiana's only national forest drew outrage. What was behind it?

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By ALEX LUBBEN | Staff writer, Alex Lubben

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A sweeping proposal drafted by a Grant Parish citizen and backed by U.S. Sen. Bill Cassidy's office that would have transferred about a quarter of Louisiana's only national forest to local control is dead after fierce opposition from hunters, conservationists, a Native American tribe and the parish's own government.

The Grant Parish Restoration Act, as it was originally conceived, was a sprawling proposal involving much more than the transfer of a large chunk of the Kisatchie National Forest to local control. It met vehement opposition in Grant Parish.

Cassidy, who lost his reelection bid last Saturday, introduced a dramatically stripped-down version of the bill on Wednesday — the original was 12 pages long, the new version is just three. The revised measure would make it easier for counties with large federal landholdings or federal prisons to qualify for the New Markets Tax Credit, which provides tax incentives for private investment in low-income communities.

"The locals spoke," Cassidy said. "That's why you have a partnership. You work with locals and you find out what's on their heart. This was a great way to find out what's on their heart."

## **After Louisiana's Bill Cassidy flips vote, Senate advances resolution against Iran war**

Louisiana Wildlife Federation Executive Director Rebecca Triche framed the plan as part of an "alarming trend toward reducing and redirecting federal public lands away from federal management."

The original draft bill was written by Cassidy's staff and a private citizen, Charles Carpenter, who said he has a years-long relationship with the senator dating back to Cassidy's time working as a doctor in Baton Rouge. Cassidy's office declined to explain why it worked so closely with Carpenter on the draft bill.



Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-Baton Rouge, speaks to supporters during an election night watch party Saturday, May 16, 2026, in Baton Rouge.

Associated Press Photo by Gerald Herbert

Carpenter, who described himself as a “financial restructuring guru” and is listed as the co-CEO of Sextant Capital Advisors, a Metairie-based financial advisory firm, said he was motivated by what he described as flawed federal census data that has cost the parish millions in grants, loans and disaster relief.

“Statistics cost my community several hundred million dollars,” he said.

Now that his proposal is dead, Carpenter said Grant Parish will face “a future in which the federal government will continue to be our biggest hindrance to growth.”

The parish is ineligible for certain rural federal grant programs because the population of its federal prison in Pollock is counted as part of its population in census data, Carpenter said. Both the original bill and the one Cassidy introduced Wednesday propose to change federal law to exclude prisoners from its population to make the parish eligible for additional federal funding for low-population rural communities.

But the original plan did not stop there.

## 'If you get straight A's'

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It would also have sold the federal prison in Pollock to a private investor — "like BlackRock," Carpenter said — while the Bureau of Prisons continued to operate it, making it taxable property.

Those additional property taxes would be funneled back into the parish's schools, he said, where he hoped to pay low-income students money in exchange for good behavior and academic success.

"We're generating \$2 to \$5 million a year of cash flow off this prison. And if you get straight A's, we'll give you X amount of dollars," Carpenter said.

What generated the most local opposition, however, was the proposal around the parish's portion of the Kisatchie National Forest.

The plan proposed to transfer all of the Kisatchie in Grant Parish, about 140,000 acres, or a quarter of the total forest, to the control of the parish's government and its school board. It would have conveyed the forest land "for public purposes, including forestry, conservation, recreation, community development, economic development, or energy generation."

It also would have transferred the air and mineral rights from the federal government to the parish. The bill included no prohibition on using the forest for carbon capture, oil and gas, or data centers.

"Absolutely none of us want oil and gas drilling or any carbon capture storage or any data center development whatsoever in the national forest in Grant Parish," Carpenter said.

But that wasn't enough to assuage officials and Grant Parish residents, prompting one local, Dan DeWitt, to speculate that future parish officials could open up the forest for development or other uses.

"I don't know what we're going to have in five years," he said at a recent public meeting. "We might have a whole other band of crazies in here."

Elizabeth "Libby" Rogers, the chief of the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians, also spoke out in opposition to the plan.

"We are a sovereign nation," she said. "And we are opposed to this."

## 'A tongue-in-cheek proposal'

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Sissy Pace, the parish manager, worried that Grant Parish “just does not have the resources to even begin to maintain the national forest,” she said. “I don't think people realize how much actually goes into that with the biologists, and the fire control. It's way more than people even realize.”

Cephas Bowie, Jr., the president of the parish's police jury, noted that the local government didn't have any role in initiating the plan, and said he had not seen a written version of the bill before last week's public hearing.

Carpenter, however, felt that his plan was misunderstood, and insisted that he tried to enlist local officials to support and craft the plan alongside him. He said that his primary motivation for bringing the national forest under local control was the Trump administration's budget cuts and layoffs at the U.S. Forest Service. Bringing the Kisatchie under local control would allow Grant Parish to preserve it.

He proposed creating a kind of franchise system, modeled after fast food chains, for the forest. The Kisatchie, he said, could maintain the U.S. Forest Service's “brand” while operating under the local government.

“I'm trying to save the forest for the future by reimagining it as McDonald's,” he said.

He noted that the Kisatchie has lost revenue as the price of lumber has dropped in recent decades. His plan would have supplemented the forest's lost revenue with solar energy, which would be used to power the jail, and any extra revenues would be spent on education in the parish.

Some of the plan's opponents also noted in online posts that a prior version of the legislation, which Carpenter described as “tongue-in-cheek,” included a plan for the Trump administration to “buy Siberia” and included a \$10 million commission to Carpenter's firm.

“That was a tongue-in-cheek proposal designed to get President Trump's attention,” Carpenter said.

As for the \$10 million commission, Carpenter said that was inserted to make it appear that the proposal was legitimate.

“When someone like that is reading your work,” he said, “they always want to know how

you're getting paid.”