1	IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES
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3	MARVIN M. BRANDT REVOCABLE :
4	TRUST, ET AL., :
5	Petitioners : No. 12-1173
6	v. :
7	UNITED STATES :
8	x
9	Washington, D.C.
10	Tuesday, January 14, 2014
11	
12	The above-entitled matter came on for oral
13	argument before the Supreme Court of the United States
14	at 11:14 a.m.
15	APPEARANCES:
16	STEVEN J. LECHNER, ESQ., Lakewood, Colorado; on behalf
17	of Petitioners.
18	ANTHONY A. YANG, ESQ., Assistant to the Solicitor
19	General, Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.; on
20	behalf of Respondent.
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1	PROCEEDINGS
2	(11:14 a.m.)
3	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We will hear
4	argument next in Case 12-1173, Marvin Brandt Revocable
5	Trust v. United States.
6	Mr. Lechner.
7	ORAL ARGUMENT OF STEVEN J. LECHNER
8	ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONERS
9	MR. LECHNER: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it
10	please the Court:
11	If upheld, the decision below will upset
12	100 years of property law and title to perhaps a million
13	acres of land, based upon an implied reversionary
14	interest that the government recently created.
15	I would like to make three points: First,
16	the decision below violates Leo Sheep, where this Court
17	rejected the government's attempt to create a property
18	interest through implication and reaffirmed that the
19	government does not retain any interest not expressly
20	reserved in the patent or the granting statute.
21	Two, the decision below is contrary to both
22	the government's argument and this Court's ruling in
23	Great Northern that 1875 Act rights-of-way are easements
24	and are not fees.

And finally, the decision below is

25

- 1 inconsistent with the Department of Interior's
- 2 longstanding interpretation that the 1875 Act granted
- 3 only an easement.
- 4 It is axiomatic that the highest evidence of
- 5 title in this country is a patent from the government.
- 6 When the government issues a patent, it divests itself
- 7 of title except for those interests expressly reserved.
- 8 Here, the patent did not reserve any interest in the
- 9 1875 Act --
- 10 JUSTICE SCALIA: Counsel, you are not
- 11 reading this, are you?
- 12 JUSTICE BREYER: It's all right.
- 13 MR. LECHNER: Here the patent did not
- 14 reserve any interest in 1875 Act right-of-way. Yet the
- 15 government knew how to reserve interests at that time
- 16 because it reserved the interest for ditches and canal,
- 17 and reserved the right to two Forest Service roads when
- 18 it issued the patent.
- 19 That some interests were reserved by the
- 20 government in 1976 shows that other interests were not.
- 21 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, under Section 1912,
- 22 the government could -- did reserve an interest for a
- 23 public highway; is that correct?
- MR. LECHNER: No.
- 25 JUSTICE ALITO: No?

- 1 MR. LECHNER: 1912, Section 1912 has to be
- 2 read in conjunction with this Court's decision in
- 3 Northern Pacific v. Townsend, and Stringham. And in
- 4 those decisions, this Court held that railroad
- 5 rights-of-way were limited fees with implied
- 6 reversionary interests.
- 7 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: The patent you talk
- 8 about, I am not recalling it exactly. It had some -- it
- 9 mentioned the railroad interest, right?
- 10 MR. LECHNER: Yes, it mentioned it in the
- 11 context of, that Brandt's title is subject to those
- 12 rights for railroad purposes as had been granted to the
- 13 railroad under the 1875 Act.
- 14 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So it didn't
- 15 characterize it as either an easement or a fee with an
- 16 implied reverter?
- 17 MR. LECHNER: That it was subject to those
- 18 rights for railroad purposes as had been granted to the
- 19 railroad sounds like it was granted subject to a
- 20 servitude. "Rights for railroad purpose" sounds like a
- 21 servitude. And of course that's how the Department of
- 22 Interior interpreted it at the time, that these 1875
- 23 rights-of-way were easements, following its longstanding
- 24 interpretation plus this Court's ruling in Great
- Northern that these were easements.

- 1 And at the time, that regulation was the law
- 2 of the land. And that's -- that controlled the title
- 3 that Brandt got.
- 4 JUSTICE BREYER: What they are saying, I
- 5 think the government's point is -- the other side is
- 6 saying, and I don't remember the term of my property
- 7 law. What's the right term? It's -- you grant to A,
- 8 black acre to A and his heirs; it's a fee simple. But
- 9 it's subject to a shifting; it's subject to divestiture,
- 10 subject to a condition subsequent. What's the right
- 11 term?
- MR. LECHNER: Well --
- 13 JUSTICE BREYER: It shifts the -- it shifts
- 14 it back.
- MR. LECHNER: A defeasible fee? Or implied
- 16 conditional --
- 17 JUSTICE BREYER: It could be. There was a
- 18 technical term they used to have. But anyway, that's
- 19 what they're saying.
- 20 MR. LECHNER: That's what they're saying.
- 21 JUSTICE BREYER: And they are saying that
- 22 that's, for purposes of who owns the land, the mineral
- 23 rights, it's treated as an easement. But for purposes
- 24 of deciding who it reverts to, it's treated as a fee
- 25 subject to a shifting use or whatever you call it.

- 1 Subject to -- what did you say? Subject to --
- 2 MR. LECHNER: Subject to a right of
- 3 reverter.
- 4 JUSTICE BREYER: Yes.
- 5 MR. LECHNER: Yes. But that's similar to
- 6 the argument that the government made in 1942 in Great
- 7 Northern. The limited fee --
- 8 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, it's different in
- 9 this respect. It's different that there they were
- 10 talking about who owns the mineral rights. So for those
- 11 purposes they say it's treated like an easement. But
- 12 for who gets the reverter, it's treated like a shift of
- 13 the fee.
- 14 JUSTICE SCALIA: Oh, that's nice. Do you
- 15 know of any other real estate thing which says it's an
- 16 easement for one purpose and the fee for another? The
- 17 government absolutely denied in Great Northern, didn't
- 18 it? It was -- that was the government's case; this was
- 19 not a fee.
- 20 MR. LECHNER: Exactly.
- 21 JUSTICE SCALIA: They didn't say it's a --
- 22 you know, for some purposes it is. They said it was not
- 23 a fee. And that's what the Court held, contrary -- in
- 24 accordance with what the government wanted, right?
- 25 MR. LECHNER: Correct.

- 1 JUSTICE SCALIA: And that case has been
- 2 around for how long?
- 3 MR. LECHNER: 72 years.
- 4 JUSTICE SCALIA: Okay. And the case
- 5 explicitly says it's an easement. And people have been
- 6 buying and selling real estate I assume in reliance on
- 7 that case for -- for that entire period of time. And
- 8 now the government has this new theory that for some
- 9 purposes it's a fee; for some purposes it's an easement.
- 10 That's not what Great Northern said.
- MR. LECHNER: No, but I think it's important
- 12 that -- the argument that the government is making today
- is similar to their alternative argument that they made
- 14 there in Great Northern, saying, okay, well, if it's not
- 15 an easement, then it's a limited fee in the surface.
- 16 This Court in Great Northern did not even
- 17 address that alternative argument, which shows how
- 18 strongly this Court in Great Northern believed it was
- 19 just an easement. And this --
- 20 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But they are not
- 21 really not alternative -- well, maybe it's all right to
- 22 say they are alternative arguments, but they are
- 23 mutually exclusive arguments. I mean they are
- 24 alternative in the sense that they led to the same
- 25 result, but the one argument is that this is A, and the

- 1 other argument is this is not A.
- 2 MR. LECHNER: Yes. They'd be mutually
- 3 exclusive.
- 4 JUSTICE BREYER: All right. We have a
- 5 brief here from the cities, and they point out that --
- 6 that, of course, there is reliance on your side;
- 7 you're -- I believe you are absolutely right. But they
- 8 say there is also a lot of reliance on the other side,
- 9 because cities have built highways, and they've -- or
- 10 states have, and they've converted it to use under
- 11 patents or under statutes that the United States gave
- 12 them that right. And all those are going to be invalid
- 13 if you win.
- So what's your response to that?
- 15 MR. LECHNER: They would all -- I'm not sure
- 16 that they would be invalid, necessarily.
- 17 JUSTICE BREYER: Why -- why?
- 18 MR. LECHNER: Well, I'm not -- I don't know
- 19 where all the city public highways' interests are,
- 20 vis-à-vis how the land was originally patented. It
- 21 could have been originally patented in a town site plat
- 22 or something like that, that -- as opposed to here,
- 23 where it was originally patented to one -- under one
- 24 patent, and I'm not sure how all the cities' property
- 25 was acquired.

- 1 JUSTICE SCALIA: I assume your answer would
- 2 be that if it's a choice between disappointing people
- 3 who properly relied on the law, and disappointing people
- 4 who were -- were not following the law, it's clear who
- 5 should -- who should take it in the neck. It's the
- 6 latter, isn't it?
- 7 MR. LECHNER: Absolutely, plus the cities
- 8 also have the -- the power of the eminent -- the power
- 9 of eminent domain. And if they would want a public
- 10 highway, they certainly could condemn one.
- 11 JUSTICE GINSBURG: I thought this -- the
- 12 cities were relying on Section 912, as applied to the
- 13 1875 Act.
- 14 MR. LECHNER: That's what -- that's what
- 15 they -- that's what the cities were relying on. But you
- 16 must keep in mind that Section 912 did not alter or
- amend the 1875 Act, so the nature of the grant in the
- 18 1875 Act must be looked through the eyes of Congress in
- 19 1875.
- In 1922, when Congress passed Section 912,
- 21 Congress was grappling with what to do with these
- 22 isolated strips of land that would be administratively
- 23 burdensome to manage. And they said -- well,
- 24 originally, they said, well, let's give them to the
- 25 settlers because they are the ones entitled to it in the

- 1 first place, and then -- and then as an afterthought
- 2 said, well, let's put these as a public highway.
- 3 But they did not amend the grant under the
- 4 1875 Act or alter the amended grant.
- 5 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Well, can you explain to
- 6 me something to me about that 1875 Act a little bit? We
- 7 know that until 1871, these railroad rights-of-way were
- 8 considered to leave the government in the position of
- 9 having a reversionary interest.
- 10 MR. LECHNER: Correct.
- 11 JUSTICE GINSBURG: And I don't see anything
- 12 in the 1875 Act statute. There was an end to the giving
- 13 away of large -- large quantities of land to the
- 14 railroad, and so that was out. But what is there in
- 15 the 1875 Act that changes the right-of-way from what it
- 16 had been up until 1871?
- 17 MR. LECHNER: As the government argued in
- 18 Great Northern and as this Court adopted that argument,
- 19 the key provision in the 1875 Act is Section 4, which
- 20 reserved the right to Congress to dispose of the lands
- 21 underlying 1875 rights-of-way to settlers.
- 22 And this was a reflection of the change of
- 23 policy in 1871 because that's where the Congress changed
- 24 its policy to -- in an effort to secure homesteads to
- 25 actual settlers as opposed to benefiting the railroads.

- 1 In Section 4, as this Court said in Great
- 2 Northern, after language to demonstrate a conveyance of
- 3 an easement would be hard to find.
- 4 JUSTICE GINSBURG: But the railroad wasn't
- 5 benefited by the end of the 1871 understanding of the
- 6 right-of-way. The one that was benefited was the
- 7 government. The government got -- got back the land, so
- 8 it's not -- we're not -- was going to stop giving land
- 9 to the railroad, yes, but the beneficiary that is losing
- 10 out under your interpretation is the government.
- 11 MR. LECHNER: But it's -- it's not only my
- 12 interpretation, it's the interpretation of the Court in
- 13 Great Northern that it was an easement. And this Court
- 14 was not -- this Court in Great Northern knew the
- 15 difference of the word "easement" and knew what the
- 16 significance of using that term would mean. So did the
- 17 government at the time.
- 18 JUSTICE KENNEDY: There were -- there were
- 19 points along the right-of-way where the railroad needed
- 20 a station or a wider area for water towers and so forth.
- 21 And it -- it usually could receive those by simply
- 22 filing a patent if it was within a permitted zone, if it
- 23 was within -- if they were 20 miles equidistant or
- 24 something like that.
- 25 How did they get those additional lands?

- 1 MR. LECHNER: The station --
- 2 JUSTICE KENNEDY: One way they could do them
- 3 was to condemn them, but absent condemnation, could they
- 4 just receive them from the government?
- 5 MR. LECHNER: Well, under -- under the 1875
- 6 Act, yes, Congress did provide for station grounds. The
- 7 railroad could secure station grounds by filing a map of
- 8 the station grounds with the local land office, and once
- 9 the secretary approved, then they would acquire the
- 10 station grounds.
- But the nature of the grant that they
- 12 required on the station grounds is the same as for the
- 13 right-of-way, and that's merely an easement.
- 14 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Oh. So it's -- so it was
- 15 clear at the time of the grant that it was on the --
- 16 that what was granted was co-extensive with what the
- 17 right-of-way was, with the railroad right-of-way.
- 18 MR. LECHNER: Yes. And that was how the
- 19 Department of Interior originally interpreted it in
- 20 1888, as the -- the railroad didn't get a fee in
- 21 anything, it got a right-of-way -- it got an easement in
- 22 the railroad -- in the right-of-way and in the station
- 23 grounds.
- 24 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Are there any instances in
- 25 which the railroad can keep its station even if it

- 1 abandons the right-of-way? Or does the station fall
- 2 with the -- when the right-of-way is abandoned?
- 3 MR. LECHNER: I think the right -- the
- 4 station grounds are tied to the right-of-way. So if you
- 5 abandon the right-of-way, the station grounds would also
- 6 be extinguished and unburden the underlying fee.
- 7 JUSTICE ALITO: Could I ask you again about
- 8 Section 912? Your patent says that it is subject to
- 9 those rights for railroad purposes as have been granted
- 10 to the railway company in particular, and its successors
- 11 and assigns.
- Now, that was -- that patent came after the
- 13 enactment of 912, and 912 clarifies the rights of -- or
- 14 changes the rights of railroad companies and says that
- if they abandon property, within one year after that,
- 16 they -- there can be a public highway established on
- 17 that -- on that property. So why wasn't your patent
- 18 subject to that?
- 19 MR. LECHNER: Well -- well, first, I
- 20 don't -- 912 did not change the grant to the railroad.
- 21 912 applies if the government has any remaining interest
- 22 in the right-of-way.
- 23 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, you didn't get your
- 24 property from the railroad. You got it from the
- 25 government.

1	MR. LECHNER: Correct.
2	JUSTICE ALITO: You got a patent from the
3	government. So the question is: What were they
4	conveying to you? And if you read the patent in
5	connection with 912, isn't it clear they're conveying to
6	you every arguably everything other than this right
7	to have a public highway established on that land when
8	it was abandoned by the railroad?
9	MR. LECHNER: They were conveying it subject
10	to those rights for railroad purposes is the specific
11	language. And but 912 does not create a reservation; it
12	doesn't create a right of reverter. It was simply to
13	deal with what they were going to do with these strips
14	of land upon abandonment.
15	Because at the time, that's when abandonment
16	of the railroads first began, Congress was worried we
17	were going to have these isolated strips. It didn't
18	change the 1875 Act, it didn't change the previously
19	granted rights-of-way to expand the scope of them.
20	But when they were abandoned and they came
21	back under the law at the time that the government had
22	the implied condition of reverter, they came back. The
23	government said, okay, well, if you want to establish a
24	public highway, that's fine, otherwise, it's going to

go -- it's going to inure to the benefit of the settler.

25

- 1 But it didn't change the nature of the
- 2 grant. It didn't change the 1875 Act. It didn't create
- 3 it. It did not create an interest that wasn't there
- 4 before. It was just how to deal with the interest that
- 5 the -- that Congress thought it had after this Court's
- 6 decision in Townsend and Stringham.
- 7 JUSTICE ALITO: I still don't understand it.
- 8 You say this was purely an easement. All right. So
- 9 that means that when there's an abandonment, the
- 10 government has complete title to the property, right?
- 11 They convey that property to you, but before they do
- 12 that, they say that there's this reservation of rights
- 13 with respect to the establishment of a highway.
- 14 MR. LECHNER: I'm -- I'm -- one -- well,
- 15 I'm -- I'm troubled. Under -- under your hypothetical,
- 16 the government still owns the underlying land when the
- 17 railroad's abandoned? So when the railroad is
- 18 abandoned, the two estates merge. There was one.
- 19 JUSTICE ALITO: That's your argument, isn't
- 20 it?
- 21 MR. LECHNER: Well, I think that's the
- 22 argument under -- under the common law, too, is -- is
- 23 what --
- 24 JUSTICE ALITO: Yes. Okay. And may be --
- 25 MR. LECHNER: So they -- they merge.

- 1 JUSTICE ALITO: It may be a good argument. 2 MR. LECHNER: They merge. 3 JUSTICE ALITO: But that's your argument. 4 JUSTICE BREYER: Now, what about when 912 5 says that when the railroad abandons a piece of the 6 right-of-way, okay, it then says that the interest of the United States, with all right, title, and interest 7 in the state of the United States shall be vested in the 8 9 town that builds the highway. 10 But your point is, that's true, but where 11 they previously -- where they have previous -- where 12 they have given -- where they conveyed it to a private 13 person, they didn't have any right, title, and interest, 14 because on abandonment it was simply an easement. And 15 on abandonment, that goes to the property owner who owns 16 the -- the land on either side.
- 17 Is that -- I mean, your point is that the
- 18 United States didn't have any right, title, and interest
- 19 on the abandonment unless the United States continued to
- 20 own the property.
- 21 MR. LECHNER: Correct.
- 22 JUSTICE BREYER: All right. So that is your
- 23 point. They can't convey what they don't have.
- MR. LECHNER: Correct.
- 25 JUSTICE BREYER: Okay.

1	MR. LECHNER: And there's
2	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Let's take this in a
3	normal easement situation. I have an easement to go
4	through your backyard to get to the street. Can I
5	assign that easement to another person so that the
6	person who buys my home can now walk through your
7	backyard?
8	MR. LECHNER: In certain circumstances, yes.
9	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So what's wrong with the
10	concept that when this land was given to you as a
11	railroad right-of-way, when it's abandoned, that the
12	railroad, in essence, under 1912, and under the 1922
13	Act, that you are giving that easement to the U.S. to
14	use as a right-of-way?
15	And so, whether it's a trail or a highway or
16	any of the other items that are specified in the statute
17	that that easement is continuing to be used by the
18	person who gave it, which was originally the U.S. Your
19	patent was given subject to that easement, to that
20	right-of-way.
21	MR. LECHNER: It was subject to those rights
22	for railroad purposes, correct.
23	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well, what was the
24	language of the patent?
25	MR. LECHNER: Subject to those rights for

- 1 railroad purposes, that conveys --
- 2 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Was that the exact
- 3 language? I thought it was for right-of-way.
- 4 MR. LECHNER: Exact language on page 78,
- 5 Petitioner's Appendix.
- 6 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: The Joint Appendix?
- 7 MR. LECHNER: Petitioner's Appendix, 78,
- 8 sorry.
- 9 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Too many briefs. Sorry.
- 10 MR. LECHNER: 78.
- JUSTICE KENNEDY: And what do you want us to
- 12 read there?
- MR. LECHNER: Well, there was a question
- 14 about whether that was actually the language, was it
- 15 subject to those rights. The last full paragraph,
- 16 "subject to those rights for railroad purposes have been
- 17 granted to the railroad under the 1875 Act."
- 18 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: The 1875 Act, what was
- 19 given to the railroad was a right-of-way.
- 20 MR. LECHNER: A right to lay their tracks
- 21 and a right of passage.
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Just as I'm seeing the
- 23 1875 grant, it was the right-of-way through public
- 24 lands.
- MR. LECHNER: Well, yes, and as the

- 1 government argued in Great Northern that that was --
- 2 that right in the 1875 Act was a right to lay tracks and
- 3 it was a right of passage, an easement.
- 4 JUSTICE KAGAN: Mr. Lechner, I know Great Northern said so
- 5 and that is surely very strong support for your
- 6 view. But why did Great Northern think that there was a
- 7 difference between pre-1871 grants and post?
- 8 MR. LECHNER: First, the shift in Congress's
- 9 policy. And the railroads fell out of disfavor and
- 10 Congress passed resolution saying -- you know, we want
- 11 to hold on to these lands to secure homesteads for
- 12 actual settlers.
- 13 JUSTICE KAGAN: I mean, I guess I had thought if you
- 14 were just dealing with this as a matter of first
- 15 impression that the shift in Congress's policy was a
- 16 shift about whether to give away -- you know, huge
- swaths of land to the railroads, and that Congress
- indeed decided, enough of this, we are not going to give
- 19 these checkerboard grants of land to the railroad,
- 20 because they are making a mint from this, and we would
- 21 rather give it to homesteaders.
- 22 But there was -- I don't see any evidence
- 23 that there was any shift in policy or any reason why
- there would be a shift in policy, as to what the rights
- of way were. Whether they were easements or whether

- 1 they were limited fees.
- 2 MR. LECHNER: Well, Section 4 has a lot to
- 3 do with that, and that is where Congress reserved the
- 4 right to dispose of the underlying lands to the
- 5 settlers. That provision is not found in the pre-1871
- 6 railroad grants, and this Court in Great Northern looked
- 7 at that and you say, you got to look at Section 4, that
- 8 provides light on how to interpret the right-of-way
- 9 grant in Section 1.
- 10 And because of Congress's intent and the
- 11 legislative history surrounding similar language when
- 12 Congress passed it in 1872, they called it the
- right-of-way is merely going to be an encumbrance.
- 14 JUSTICE KAGAN: I guess -- you know, again,
- 15 if you were just looking at this as a matter of first
- 16 impression, the language of Section 4 does not seem to
- 17 me to be very indicative of anything. You know, it says
- 18 "subject to the right-of-way." Subject to the
- 19 right-of-way. Whatever the right-of-way is. Subject to
- 20 the right-of-way if it's an easement. Subject to the
- 21 right-of-way if it's a limited fee. Doesn't seem to
- 22 pick one or the other.
- 23 MR. LECHNER: But as the government argued
- in Great Northern, it would be silly to patent the
- 25 underlying lands subject to a fee. I mean, there would

- 1 be no reason for that language at all if the railroad
- got a fee. And then you patented the -- in effect it
- 3 would be the adjacent land, not the underlying land.
- 4 There would be no reason to say that the adjacent land
- 5 is subject to a fee because with the limited fees, they
- 6 were envisioning those things going to the center of the
- 7 earth.
- 8 So you would be patenting the adjacent land.
- 9 But under Section 4 and as Great Northern interpreted,
- 10 the patents go to the underlying land and that's what
- 11 happened in this case, because Brandt owns the
- 12 underlying land and minerals.
- 13 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Well, in your answer it
- seemed to me, and maybe you have to do this to proffer, that you
- 15 confused limited fee with fee simple , with absolute fee.
- 16 Now, obviously that's true if it's the same owner, they
- merge.
- 18 MR. LECHNER: Well, I was using limited fee
- in the context as this Court used it in Townsend,
- 20 limited fee with the implied condition of reverter. I
- 21 mean, even in Townsend 1903, the railroad got it all,
- 22 but it was subject to implied condition of reverter if
- 23 they stopped using it for railroad purpose. But they
- 24 did give fee simple absolute to the center of the earth
- is how it was construed at that time.

1 So that sheds light on the fact that Section 2 4 reflects that only an easement was granted because you would not need to have Subject 2 language at all if you 3 were just patenting the adjacent lands. 5 It is also well established that the Department of Interior's interpretation of public land laws such as the 1875 Act is 6 7 entitled to great deference. This is because public 8 land laws provide for the acquisition of the title, 9 which must be secure. Beginning in 1888 and continuing through today, the Department of Interior 10 still construes the 1875 Act as easements and they can 11 still construe 1875 Act rights of way as different from 12 13 pre-1871. JUSTICE SCALIA: I don't understand how that 14 15 can be, and yet, the government can argue contrary to what the government says. I mean, is that what you are 16 17 telling us? MR. LECHNER: I'm saying --18 19 JUSTICE SCALIA: The Interior says one thing 20 and the Justice Department here says something else? I mean, we have a president who reconciles these two 21 22 things. He must agree with one or the other. 23 MR. LECHNER: Well, I think, under this 24 Court's precedent, you defer to the agency in charge of administering the 1875 Act, and that is the Department 25

1	of Interior. And the Department of Interior has
2	consistently interpreted these as these rights of way
3	as easements and that interpretation is entitled to
4	substantial deference.
5	JUSTICE SCALIA: I'm sure the government
6	will have an explanation as to why we shouldn't.
7	MR. LECHNER: If it pleases the Court, I
8	would like to reserve the remainder of my time for
9	rebuttal.
10	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
11	Mr. Yang.
12	ORAL ARGUMENT OF ANTHONY A. YANG
13	ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENT
14	MR. YANG: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it
15	please the Court:
16	The statute, its legislative history, the
17	surrounding statutory context which includes Section 912
18	as well as 1906 and 1909 Acts and this Court's decisions
19	construing the 1875 Act including Section 4 which
20	predated Great Northern show that the United States
21	retains the reversionary interest in the surface of the
22	land of right-of-ways granted to railroads
23	JUSTICE ALITO: Mr. Yang, I have to say I
24	think the government gets a prize for understatement

with its brief in this case. You have a sentence in

25

- 1 your brief that says, "We acknowledge that there is
- 2 language in this Court's opinion in Great Northern and
- 3 in the government's brief in that case that lends some
- 4 support to petitioner's contrary argument."
- 5 Here are the subject headings of the
- 6 government's brief in Great Northern. "The right-of-way
- 7 granted by the Act of March 3, 1875, is in the nature of
- 8 an easement. The language of the 1875 Act shows that
- 9 only an easement was granted. The legislative
- 10 background and history of the 1875 Act show that the
- 11 grant was of an easement rather than a fee.
- 12 Subsequent administrative and congressional
- 13 construction confirm that only an easement was granted."
- 14 And the first sentence of the summary of the
- 15 argument --
- 16 MR. YANG: There is also other portions of
- 17 the brief. I would refer the Court, for instance, to
- 18 Footnote 4 where the government said there would be a
- 19 separate question raised about whether a patent holder
- 20 subsequently who obtains the patent after the grant of
- 21 right-of-way would take this government interest. And
- 22 the Court -- the government said in fact that would
- 23 raise different questions.
- 24 The Court recognized that on pages -- the
- last two pages of its opinion, it specifically limited

- 1 its judgment to situations where the government retained
- interest in the entire surrounding parcel and, in fact,
- 3 modified the judgment below which enjoined the railroad
- 4 from oil drilling simply to apply to that.
- 5 Not only that, the Court was writing on --
- 6 the government didn't cite, for instance --
- 7 JUSTICE SCALIA: Wait, wait. Before you go,
- 8 you really think the Court was saying, It will be an
- 9 easement when that suits the government, but it will be
- something else when that suits the government?
- 11 MR. YANG: No, I think what the Court was --
- 12 JUSTICE SCALIA: I mean, it's either an
- 13 easement or it's not an easement. You really think
- 14 the -- the opinion meant to reserve the question whether
- 15 it was an easement.
- 16 MR. YANG: I do with respect to the issue
- 17 that we have here. The question before the Court was
- 18 whether the right-of-way, which is a statutory term,
- 19 Congress could have used "easement"; it could have used
- 20 "fee." It did not. It uses a special statutory term
- 21 which has accumulated meaning over time, particularly,
- in the railroad context.
- 23 And in that context, the Court was deciding
- 24 whether it was in the nature of an easement, which as
- our subject heading said, it's in the nature of an

1 easement. But that's vis-à-vis the United States --JUSTICE BREYER: 2 I got that point. -- with respect to the mineral 3 MR. YANG: 4 lands. And, in fact, the shift that, Justice Kagan, you 5 were talking about is a shift about subsidies. It was a 6 shift of subsidy away from these lavish land grants. And when Congress was stopping that -- that lavish grant 7 to railroads, it made no sense to construe the act with 8 respect to the mineral rights, which the Court said 9 10 were -- were mineral riches. Why would Congress do that 11 when it was cutting back on --12 JUSTICE ALITO: That may be. 13 JUSTICE BREYER: All right. 14 JUSTICE ALITO: But the term "easement" is a 15 well-known term with an established meaning. And you're 16 saying that -- you said it was an easement. The Court 17 said it was an easement. You -- you persuaded the Court to say it was an easement. And now you're saying this 18 is some kind of property right that has no name, 19 20 previously unknown to the law. 21 It's a right-of-way. And, in MR. YANG: 22 fact, the government's brief also said that with 23 respect -- and I'm quoting from page 9 -- with respect 24 to the surface -- the control -- under any of the 25 theories, even under the easement theory, which I don't

- 1 believe is a true common law easement, the railroad's
- 2 control of the surface was complete. And then we went
- 3 on further -- and this is on pages 36 to 37 -- that said
- 4 it was a fact that the right-of-way has some of the
- 5 attributes of a fee, and those included exclusive and
- 6 perpetual occupation and remedies --
- 7 JUSTICE BREYER: All right. Let me put it
- 8 this way.
- 9 MR. YANG: And so, again, if we were to
- 10 rewrite our brief, we would certainly do so much more
- 11 carefully now. But I think that the way that you read
- 12 the brief is the way that you read opinions, which is in
- 13 the context in which it was decided, particularly
- 14 because Footnote 4, and this Court's opinion responding
- to Footnote 4, made clear that they were only addressing
- 16 mineral rights where the United States held the
- 17 surrounding parcel.
- 18 And -- and that's particularly true because
- this Court had already construed Section 4 of the 1875
- 20 Act before Great Northern in Stalker and in Steinke.
- 21 And in Stalker, the Court held that the subject to --
- 22 this is on page 154 -- a patent was subject to the
- 23 railroad rights acquired by approval. That's the
- 24 approval in Section 4, in the subject to language in
- 25 Section 4.

1	"Upon approval, the grounds so selected were
2	segregated from the public lands and the required
3	material to withdraw the land granted from the market."
4	And then the Court goes on, and this is on page 154
5	again, "The later patent," the patent issued to a
6	settler. Even though the local land office forgot to or
7	omitted to mark the right-of-way on the land plats, the
8	subsequent patent was inoperative to pass title to those
9	later patentholders.
10	And then in Steinke this is 1922 the
11	Court followed Stalker and said, "The approved map under
12	Section 4 is the equivalent of a patent." And then they
13	go on to say, citing Stalker, that the later patent was
14	inoperative to pass title.
15	And I think it's important, in both of those
16	cases, the Court cited to Interior's regulations. In
17	Stalker, the Court quoted at length the regulations from
18	1888, which, although the Court suggested that in Great
19	Northern those were the first regulations, they actually
20	weren't.
21	There were prior regulations in 1878 which
22	discuss nothing about the nature of the fee. And those,
23	unfortunately, are hard to find. They are in Senate
24	Executive Document 30, 45th Congress, Third Session,
25	1879.

- 2 rely on were specifically referenced by the Court,
- 3 including the regs that say the disposition of the land
- 4 surrounding the right-of-way is subject to the
- 5 right-of-way.
- 6 JUSTICE KAGAN: Mr. Yang, the Petitioners
- 7 say that there are thousands or even tens of thousands
- 8 of people in their position. Do you dispute that?
- 9 MR. YANG: We don't have good numbers,
- 10 actually, on that.
- 11 JUSTICE BREYER: But what are the numbers?
- 12 I mean, look, this is what I'm thinking. This is
- 13 property law. It's not just a question of trying to
- 14 work out what the case could or couldn't have stood for.
- 15 If I try to remember my property class, it vaguely
- 16 was -- which was a great class, A. James Casner, real
- 17 expert.
- 18 And he -- he, I think, said that when you
- 19 convey subject of divestment, the -- something called
- 20 season under the common law went to the recipient of the
- 21 conveyance.
- But if you conveyed an easement, season did
- 23 not pass. So in holding that it is an easement, you're
- 24 holding there was no season, and therefore, it couldn't
- 25 be a divestiture.

Τ	now, whether that's true of hot of 1've
2	misremembered it, I'd go back to Justice Scalia's
3	question. Is there a single example since the Domesday
4	Book, since Dadonis, since the Bracton, on little to
5	whatever it was, I mean, in the history of the common
6	law up to the present, where a court has interpreted an
7	ambiguous phrase, which doesn't say to grant an easement
8	for one purpose, but not for the other. There may be
9	some, but I didn't notice any cited in the government's
LO	brief.
L1	MR. YANG: Well, I'm not sure that there
L2	would be any common law cases.
L3	JUSTICE BREYER: No, I said in any case at
L 4	all.
L5	MR. YANG: But in this context
L 6	JUSTICE BREYER: Yes, yes. What is the
L7	case?
L8	MR. YANG: In this context
L9	JUSTICE BREYER: What is the case? I'd like
20	to read it.
21	MR. YANG: even with respect to the
22	pre-1871 statutes, the Court would sometimes
23	JUSTICE BREYER: Oh, but they had they
24	had a different view.

No, no, no.

25

MR. YANG:

1 JUSTICE BREYER: They didn't say it was an 2 easement. MR. YANG: It -- they did. 3 JUSTICE BREYER: I didn't read what -- it 4 did? 5 6 MR. YANG: They sometimes referred to them 7 as easements. 8 Which case? JUSTICE BREYER: 9 MR. YANG: I don't have it in front of me. I know that --10 11 JUSTICE BREYER: Where do I -- where is it 12 roughly in your brief? 13 MR. YANG: We didn't refer to those cases. 14 JUSTICE BREYER: Oh, all right. Well --1.5 MR. YANG: We might have cited the cases in our brief. We didn't refer to that part of the case. 16 JUSTICE BREYER: I'm surprised that -- but 17 the -- if you think there are some, I'll get my law 18 clerks to look --19 20 MR. YANG: But there are some, but the point 21 was they were trying to discuss the nature of a statutory right-of-way. Congress did not use the term 22 "easement," it did not use the term "fee." And so the 23 Court has been using common law terms which don't fit 24 25 perfectly to describe certain kinds of --

- 1 JUSTICE BREYER: Can you imagine or explain to me why a property lawyer worth his salt since 2 3 70 years ago or more, 1942, wouldn't have read that case and advised his client, who was buying the land, if the 4 5 railroad abandons it, it's yours. 6 MR. YANG: Yes. There are --7 JUSTICE BREYER: Where is some evidence of that? 8 9 MR. YANG: There are at least four reasons. 10 JUSTICE BREYER: No, not reasons. I want to 11 know if there's any authority, and then you get to the 12 the reasons. Oh, yes. There's both statutory and 13 MR. YANG: 14 case law authority. I would start with Stalker and 15 Steinke, which specifically say that when you have 16 approved the map, it's equivalent to a patent, and then therefore, any parcel subject -- is -- conveyed subject 17 to the patent or the right-of-way, which means you don't 18 get any interest at least in the surface of the 19 20 right-of-way. 21 So this -- those cases have never been
- 22 overruled, one. Two, Congress in 1906, and this is --
- 23 this isn't significant. This is at page -- Section 940
- at page 7 -- 6A and 7A of our brief. Congress said that 24
- 25 each and every grant of right-of-way under this 1875

- 1 Act -- each and every one -- "shall be declared
- forfeited if they haven't been constructed," and -- this
- 3 is important -- "the United States resumes the full
- 4 title to the lands covered thereby, free and discharged
- 5 from such easement" --
- 6 JUSTICE SCALIA: Did they give compensation
- 7 to the people --
- 8 MR. YANG: No.
- 9 JUSTICE SCALIA: -- to whom they pronounced
- 10 that?
- MR. YANG: No.
- 12 JUSTICE SCALIA: That can't change the
- meaning of the 1875 Act.
- 14 MR. YANG: But it reflects Congress's
- understanding of what the 1875 Act --
- 16 JUSTICE SCALIA: It reflects a later
- 17 Congress's understanding of what an earlier Congress
- 18 did. We don't --
- MR. YANG: Well, when we're --
- 20 JUSTICE SCALIA: -- interpret statutes on
- 21 the basis of what later Congresses think they meant.
- 22 MR. YANG: This Court did in Great Northern.
- 23 In fact, this Court --
- JUSTICE SCALIA: People have done it.
- 25 MR. YANG: Okay. That's possible, but what

- 1 we're talking about is Great Northern. And, in fact,
- 2 Great Northern quotes this language of Section 940. The
- 3 very next section goes on to say that the government's
- 4 interests shall inure to the benefit of the land
- 5 conveyed by the United States previously, which was
- 6 subject to the right-of-way.
- 7 So that section itself shows that starting
- 8 in 1906, and that's both 1906 and 1909, Congress
- 9 understood that the government had a reversionary
- 10 interest.
- 11 JUSTICE KAGAN: Mr. Yang, can I take you
- 12 back to my question?
- MR. YANG: Sure.
- 14 JUSTICE KAGAN: Thousands, tens of
- 15 thousands? How many people are involved here and how
- 16 many acres of land?
- 17 MR. YANG: Again, we don't know because the
- 18 way that these things are disposed of, there has not
- 19 been a centralized way of tracking it. It could be a
- 20 significant amount, because the 1875 Act rights-of-ways
- 21 were at least in number the most numerous.
- It's hard to know about mileage because the
- 23 specific land grants were often quite long, but in
- 24 terms -- there were at least a significant number of
- 25 1875 Act rights of ways.

1	And so going back to Justice Breyer's
2	question about why a good lawyer would not have great
3	pause about saying that you got the surface interests.
4	You have Stalker and Steinke. You have the Section 940,
5	which was enacted in 1906 and 1909.
6	You have Section 922 Section 912, which
7	was enacted in 1922, which the Court has already
8	discussed, which shows that whenever there is a forfeiture,
9	the United States' interest reverts to first for roads and
10	then to municipalities, and if there was anything left
11	it would go to a land owner.
12	That you know, was unquestioned it
13	appears until at least with the surface interests
14	until the mid-1980s, for 60 years. The municipalities
15	and roads were
16	JUSTICE BREYER: Well, I see that they do
17	and I certainly think bicycle paths are a good idea, but
18	the problem that I see here is just what Justice Kagan
19	is bringing up; that is, as I read this, I think there
20	might be millions of acres in the last 70 years that
21	have been conveyed. For all I know, there is some right
22	of way that goes through people's houses you know,
23	and all of a sudden, they are going to be living in
24	their house and suddenly a bicycle will run through it,
25	which isn't so had but I'm concerned about that and

1	your answer makes me more concerned
2	MR. YANG: Well, I think it's telling
3	JUSTICE BREYER: because you haven't
4	suggested anything that makes me think there aren't
5	millions and millions of acres involved. Now, what are
6	you going to say that disabuses me of that?
7	MR. YANG: Well, I think it's telling that
8	between 1922 and the mid-1980s this issue does not
9	appear to have arisen. It has arisen only with respect
10	to
11	JUSTICE BREYER: Exactly, because the lawyer
12	would think when he reads the case of Great Northern,
13	you think it's an easement.
14	MR. YANG: And then when the city takes the
15	road and when the municipality excuse me when the
16	municipality takes the right of way no one complained
17	for 60 years? I mean, this is the background of the
18	law. This is going to be
19	JUSTICE BREYER: So how much is that? How
20	much roughly is that? How often has it turned out that
21	there was a conveyance after 1942 there was a
22	conveyance of an abandoned right of way by the United
23	States to land that had been previously been granted to
24	a private owner?
25	MR. YANG: The amicus brief of

1	JUSTICE BREYER: How often?
2	MR. YANG: Again, we don't have good numbers
3	on how often.
4	JUSTICE BREYER: I know you don't have good
5	numbers, but can you give me a rough estimate?
6	MR. YANG: I think a significant amount of
7	time, because the if you look at the amicus brief of
8	the National Council on State Legislatures, they explain
9	this. This is
10	JUSTICE BREYER: I will say ten times as
11	much reliance on the one side than the other side, is
12	that totally wrong?
13	MR. YANG: Your Honor, I can't speculate on
14	numbers. I just don't have it would be not
15	appropriate for me for the United States to speculate on
16	numbers.
17	JUSTICE GINSBURG: Mr. Yang, would you
18	clarify what you're what Mr. Lechner told us. He
19	said that to this very day the Department of Interior
20	has taken the position that these railroad rights of way
21	are easements.
22	MR. YANG: That's not correct because it
23	needs to be qualified. After Great Northern, Interior
24	has concluded in Amerada Hess, which we cite in our
25	hrief that the subsurface interests would go to the

- 1 patentee, but with respect to the surface interests,
- 2 that has not been the case.
- In fact, until 1984 is the first case that I
- 4 have seen in a case that let -- that was the counterpart
- 5 to the Oregon Short Line case that we cite that led to
- 6 the decision here. It just wasn't disputed about the
- 7 surface interest.
- 8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Why then did no one
- 9 from the Department of Interior join your brief?
- 10 MR. YANG: They agree with our brief. We
- 11 don't always --
- 12 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: They don't have a
- 13 choice, do they? I mean, it's --
- 14 MR. YANG: No, we have been in close
- 15 consultation with the Department of Interior and they have
- signed off on this brief. The agency that is at issue
- 17 here is actually agriculture because agriculture is the
- 18 forest service which has the lands. I think --
- 19 JUSTICE SCALIA: But both of them want more
- 20 Federal lands, that's surprising, right, both
- 21 agriculture and --
- 22 MR. YANG: I think that's maybe a little
- 23 unfair, Justice Scalia. I think government is giving
- 24 the Court its view of the law here. We are interpreting
- it. Multiple agencies have been consulted and we've

been trying to come to grips with the Court's

1

2	conflicting you know, language.
3	If you take language in the abstract and you
4	divorce it from the context of the case, the Court's
5	decisions are conflicting, but when you look at the
6	context of the case, you look at Great Northern with
7	respect to saying that the subsurface interests, the
8	mineral interests are like an easement with respect to
9	the United States vis-à-vis the railroad, but then you
LO	have Stalker and Steinke saying that when under Section
L1	4 of the Act it's an authoritative construction of
L2	Section 4 of the Act. When you approve a map of a
L3	railroad under Section 4, it is tantamount to a patent
L 4	and thereafter a subsequent patent does not confer an
L5	interest on the patentee.
L 6	Those cases are reconciled, we think, by
L7	acknowledging that Stalker and Steinke control at least
L8	with respect to the surface interests, and then with
L 9	respect to the subsurface interests, Great Northern
20	clearly says that, at least vis-à-vis the United States
21	and the railroad where there is no third-parties
22	involved that is deemed to be like an easement that
23	would not give a subsurface interest. And there is real
24	important reasons to distinguish between the subsurface
> 5	and the surface with respect to rights of way

1	Surface for the right of way is what's
2	important. It's critical. You need to have an artery
3	that connects various parcels of land. That was true
4	back when 1875 was enacted and it's true now with
5	respect to highways and other uses that the government
6	might put its land to.
7	JUSTICE KAGAN: The patent here, Mr. Yang,
8	which was, what, in the mid-1970s did not reserve
9	anything. The government just made an uncritical grant
10	to the grant family?
11	MR. YANG: And that was true both in Stalker
12	and in Steinke with respect to the subsequent patents.
13	JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, I'm just suggesting
14	that after Great Northern and then you're given this
15	patent, which is unequivocal and does not reserve
16	anything, why anybody would think that they hadn't
17	gotten the whole ball of wax is a mystery.
18	MR. YANG: Well, I think you would have
19	to I think if you had a good lawyer, the good lawyer
20	would say, Look, we've got there is uncertainty here.
21	You've got Stalker and Steinke, which says you get no
22	interest. You have Great Northern, which doesn't
23	address interest that pass to third parties.
24	It only addresses the interest that the
25	railroad has, and it says there is no mineral rights.

- 1 And then you have Congress in 1906, 1909, 1922, and more
- 2 recently in 1988, doubling down and saying -- you know,
- 3 the United States' interest goes to roads first.
- 4 JUSTICE KAGAN: It seems to me a fair
- 5 reading of the history here, Mr. Yang, is that it really
- 6 didn't occur to the government until very recently that
- 7 these rights of way had value as anything other than
- 8 railroad tracks, and indeed that the government was
- 9 anxiously trying to give these things away because it
- 10 thought that these spagnetti strips of land, it's of no
- 11 use to the government, here, take them, get them off our
- 12 hands.
- And having done that for many, many, many
- decades, the government faces a problem when it turns
- around and says, you know what, we forgot, there are
- 16 bike paths.
- 17 MR. YANG: I don't think that's quite
- 18 accurate. At least since 1922, the government has
- 19 disposed of -- or Congress, I should say, has directed
- 20 the government to dispose of its reversionary interests
- 21 first to roads, and that remains true today. And then
- 22 also from 1922 until 1988, it was supposed to go to any
- 23 municipality, any land within a municipality goes to the
- 24 municipality; and then third, it would go to any land
- owner of the surrounding parcel that was paying the

1	interest	auhica	+ + ~	+ h a	riah+	o f	
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- Now, of course -- you know, Congress is free
- 3 to choose to change its decision about how to dispose of
- 4 U.S. Government interests to any government property.
- 5 There is no vested interest in that. And I think what
- 6 we are trying to say in our brief is that petitioner
- 7 asks the Court essentially to nullify a significant --
- 8 significant enactments by Congress. It would nullify --
- 9 JUSTICE BREYER: That's true, but when you
- 10 talk about -- I mean, I went and read -- when I read --
- I thought your brief was very persuasive but then I read
- 12 Great Northern and I thought they have -- they are
- 13 really quoting it correctly.
- 14 Here's what they said about the cases that
- 15 you refer to like Stringer, The conclusion that the
- 16 railroad was the owner of a limited fee -- which was the
- 17 conclusion of those earlier cases -- was based on cases
- 18 arising out of the 1871 Act, not the 1875 Act, and the
- 19 change of policy in 1875 was brought -- was not brought
- 20 to the Court's attention.
- 21 And then they say that conclusion is
- inconsistent with the language of the 1875 Act. It's
- 23 history. And it's early administrative interpretation.
- 24 We therefore do not regard this earlier case as
- 25 controlling.

1	MR. YANG: That was Townsend, which was
2	dictum. We told the Court that Townsend was dictum. In
3	Townsend, the dispute was by a railroad who got a decree
4	from a State court saying it had the right of way.
5	JUSTICE BREYER: Well, I thought they say
6	in the Stringer case. Is that same as
7	MR. YANG: Oh, I'm sorry, Stringer.
8	JUSTICE BREYER: Yes, that's the one you
9	were
10	MR. YANG: No, no, we are not relying on
11	we are relying on Stalker and Steinke, which are 1875
12	Act holdings. It's this Court construing the very
13	statute that we're talking about, Section 4, which is
14	the very section that the petitioner now, it would be
15	kind of remarkable to read language in Great Northern
16	which addressed a different question in which the
17	government specifically reserved the question of what
18	interest would transfer to a patentee.
19	The Court specifically limited its decision
20	so it wouldn't reach that issue. And then it sub
21	silentio overruled two decisions by this Court on the
22	very statute decided 30 years earlier when the Court was
23	closer to the 1875 Act? That would be a pretty
24	remarkable thing, I think. And what we're saying is
25	that, no, Stalker and Steinke remain good law, even if

- 1 you characterize the right of way as having attributes
- 2 of an easement because it's clear it can't be a common
- 3 law easement.
- I don't think that even -- petitioner may be
- 5 able to dispute this -- but a common law easement, as
- 6 this Court has explained, would not give as
- 7 traditionally framed exclusive and perpetual occupation
- 8 to the railroad. It would not give the remedy of the
- 9 fee. All those are very practical, real rights that
- 10 would have to be conferred that would be greater than a
- 11 mere common law easement. And that's true back in 1871,
- 12 and it's true in 1875, and we said it was true in our
- 13 brief to this Court.
- We said as an easement -- you know, the fact
- 15 that it has some of the attributes of a fee, including
- 16 exclusive or perpetual occupation and the remedies of a
- 17 fee and not an easement, doesn't take it out of the box
- of what we were talking about in that case.
- 19 And so, again, I think you need to read it
- 20 in context. I agree that if you just take Great
- 21 Northern and look at it without peeling back the hood a
- 22 little bit, there's language that -- you know, would
- 23 lead --
- 24 JUSTICE BREYER: That's -- that's basically
- 25 my problem. I guess you just don't have any specific

- 1 things of what property lawyers were saying. But those
- 2 two cases are from the era of Stringer, and at that
- 3 point, apparently, the Court thought it was a limited
- 4 fee.
- 5 MR. YANG: One was before --
- 6 JUSTICE BREYER: And then you get -- they
- 7 were all -- was any of them after Great Northern?
- 8 MR. YANG: No, not after Great Northern.
- 9 JUSTICE BREYER: So -- so then in Great
- 10 Northern it comes along?
- 11 MR. YANG: But Justice Breyer, I think it's
- 12 a mistake to rely on these labels of limited fee and
- easement too strongly. That's what this Court's
- 14 basically said in Union Pacific in 1957. In Union
- 15 Pacific, the Court said look, these pre-1871 cases use
- the term "limited fee," but really, we're not going to
- 17 deem that to be controlling with respect to the mineral
- 18 rights.
- 19 And the Court is doing exactly what we're
- saying should be done here, which is you understand the
- 21 right-of-way in the context of the statutory text, in
- 22 the context of the environment, the surrounding
- 23 statutory environment in the context of this Court's
- 24 decisions, and it's not a binary black-or-white choice
- 25 between -- you know, common law terms.

1	Congress didn't use those common law terms.
2	Congress used the term "right-of-way." It used the same
3	text that it did in prior grants of rights-of-way. And
4	all we're trying to say is that there are real important
5	interests here. It's not practically feasible to ever
6	reconstruct these arteries through the lands. And they
7	were important when Congress granted them to develop the
8	lands in 1875, and they remain important today, as
9	Congress has now repeatedly recognized in terms of
10	granting public roads. So
11	JUSTICE ALITO: Do we know how many miles of
12	public roads and how many miles of bike trails have
13	been you don't know that either?
14	MR. YANG: On bike trails, this is this
15	is not a Rails-to-Trails Act case. There are different
16	issues there. On the Rails-to-Trails Act case you
17	know, it's I don't have in mileage, but this is a
18	trail that in this case the government used its property
19	interest through the national forests as well as through
20	this parcel for like a 22-mile trail. There are
21	probably 1,000 miles of trail that are that would be
22	affected. And importantly, there's a lot of interest
23	going forward that would be affected.
24	When the law again the law of in 1922
25	was that the Congress would reserve the United States'

1		_	1	1		1			
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- 2 significant --
- 3 JUSTICE KAGAN: Are there highways that
- 4 would be affected? I mean, if we rule for the Brandts,
- 5 are there suddenly going to be highways that can no
- 6 longer be highways anymore?
- 7 MR. YANG: It certainly would call into
- 8 question the legality of the land transfers. And I'm
- 9 sure that could be something that could be litigated.
- 10 There would be issues -- I'm sure defenses raised by the
- 11 States and municipalities.
- 12 But what the Court would be saying is that
- for -- since 1922, and this policy continues now, that
- 14 the highways that have been created under 1875 Act would
- 15 be invalid.
- 16 JUSTICE BREYER: Can you think of anything I
- 17 can do about this? It's a case, in my mind at least,
- 18 where reliance interests on -- on a previous case in the
- 19 property law area are important, and yet none of the
- 20 briefs here really gives me a -- a reasonably concrete
- 21 idea of how much reliance there has been. And -- and --
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: On easements.
- 23 JUSTICE BREYER: So I'm somewhat in the
- 24 dark.
- 25 MR. YANG: Yes. It's difficult to know,

Τ	because again, these are kind of ad hoc things. When
2	there's an abandonment, there might be proceedings, but
3	there's been we've not been able to obtain
4	centralized, reliable information on the total number,
5	because this goes back a pretty long way. We're talking
6	about, again, starting in 1922, you know. This has been
7	unchallenged until we got two district court decisions
8	in '80 in the mid '80s with respect to the surface.
9	Now, on on the subsurface, Great Northern
10	has you know, continued to be applied by Interior and
11	that's been treated differently. And I think it's
12	important also to remember that the regulations, not
13	only were they cited by this Court in Stalker and
14	Steinke, the Court was clearly aware of the regulations.
15	In 1931, the a case called Otis Birch
16	where Interior basically followed Stalker and recognized
17	that you could not pass title. Now, that was a Mineral
18	Act case, and the Court also Interior also said that
19	because you can't separate the estates, or there's no
20	reason to separate the surface from the subsurface, the
21	mineral couldn't be transferred, either. That's been
22	overtaken by events.
23	It's important to recognize in '31, and when
24	the regs were codified in the CFR in '38, which are the
25	1909 regs, which had never been changed or revisited on

- 1 the nature of the interests, they simply just carried
- 2 forward, even though Interior recognized that the --
- 3 there would be no interest given to patentees of the
- 4 land after a right-of-way is granted under Section 4 of
- 5 the Act.
- 6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Maybe the reason you
- 7 don't have records on this, which strikes me as pretty
- 8 unusual that the government doesn't know what it owns,
- 9 is that for decades, you didn't think that you owned a
- 10 reversionary interest.
- MR. YANG: Well, for decades, we thought we
- 12 owned a reversionary interest. It's just that --
- 13 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But you don't have
- any records on where these things are.
- 15 MR. YANG: Well, but Congress told us --
- told everyone how to dispose of it. It went to streets,
- 17 roads, highways, then to municipalities, and if then not
- 18 municipalities, it would go to the landowner. So the
- 19 United States -- you know, disposed of its reversionary
- 20 interests through statute. It wasn't until 1988 that
- 21 the policy changed to -- to prioritize highways and then
- the U.S.'s interests after that.
- 23 So it's understandable why we haven't been
- 24 intimately involved with all these forfeitures that have
- occurred over time. Congress directed how the United

1	States interests should be disposed of.
2	JUSTICE GINSBURG: What would what would
3	be the exposure of the United States if we if you lose-
4	are there takings claims now?
5	MR. YANG: There are takings claims also
6	that would any 1875 Act case or right-of-way which
7	has been abandoned, which has then put to another use,
8	whether it be a highway under the current Section 912,
9	or whether it reverts to the United States, or even if,
10	for instance, it doesn't revert to the United States
11	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Are there any statute of
12	limitations? Would all of this be subject to the APA,
13	or or a claim for damages against the U.S.?
14	MR. YANG: I I don't believe the APA
15	would govern a claim of damages against the U.S. There
16	are takings claims which which proceed under the
17	Tucker Act against the U.S. Or the Little Tucker Act,
18	depending on the amount. That wouldn't be an APA issue.
19	JUSTICE SCALIA: What about adverse
20	possession? Can't the can't the
21	MR. YANG: Adverse possession is certainly
22	an issue that might would come up.
23	JUSTICE SCALIA: I would think if there's
24	been no objection to these spaghetti strips of land, I

don't think condemnation would cost the government a

25

- 1 whole lot for that matter. What, you know --
- 2 MR. YANG: Well, we've faced --
- 4 of land through --
- 5 MR. YANG: We faced a very considerable
- 6 amount of litigation in recent years.
- 7 JUSTICE BREYER: Doesn't Interior or some --
- 8 I mean, doesn't the highway -- aren't there people in
- 9 the government who keep track of where the highways are
- 10 built?
- 11 MR. YANG: Well, for local roads? This
- is -- the idea that these -- these rights-of-ways would
- go to States and localities, not Federal highways.
- 14 That's -- that's Section 912.
- 15 JUSTICE SCALIA: Yes, but you should --
- should know how much land the United States owns. It's
- 17 -- it's incredible that -- that there's no record in the
- 18 Interior Department or anywhere else of what land the
- 19 United States own. You claim you own these thousands of
- 20 acres, and you say we've not kept track of it. We just
- 21 know where it's going to go, but we don't know what we
- 22 own.
- 23 MR. YANG: There are some records that you
- 24 can get from archives with respect to specific things,
- but it's not centralized. We don't have a way of

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- 2 That's the difficulty that we have here.
- 3 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- 4 MR. YANG: Thank you.
- 5 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Mr. Lechner, you
- 6 have 4 minutes remaining.
- 7 REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF STEVEN J. LECHNER
- 8 ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONERS
- 9 MR. LECHNER: We do know how many acres are
- involved in this case, and the government is claiming 10
- of the 83 acres that it patented to Marvin Brandt's
- 12 parents.
- 13 As this Court has noted, stare decisis
- 14 concerns are -- in many cases involving property rights.
- With respect to Stalker and Steinke, those were
- 16 pre-Great Northern; those were limited fee cases. At
- 17 most, they stand for first in time, first in right.
- 18 Steinke was written by Justice Van Devanter
- 19 who also wrote Stringham, which Great Northern
- 20 overturned. And that's why Stalker and Steinke fell out
- of use over the years. And if Stalker and Steinke were
- 22 so important, the government should have brought those
- 23 cases to the Court's attention in Great Northern, but it
- 24 didn't.
- With respect to the 1931 land decision the

1	government	just	brought	up,	Ι		Ι	refer	the	Court	to
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- 2 solicitor's opinion --
- 3 JUSTICE BREYER: I guess it would be the
- 4 private parties that would have brought it up in Great
- 5 Northern, wouldn't it?
- 6 And do you have any light to shed on the
- 7 comparative amounts? I mean, they're saying -- for all
- 8 we know there are billions of dollars worth of takings
- 9 claims that will come out where the highways run, and
- 10 you're arguing, of course, any reasonable property
- 11 lawyer would have relied on Great Northern to think it
- was just conveying an easement.
- But -- you know, I'm not a property lawyer,
- and so what actually happened matters. And the amounts
- 15 matter, at least to me. And do you have any light to
- shed?
- 17 MR. LECHNER: I don't have any light to shed
- 18 on the actual mileage. We know it's thousands. We know
- 19 that --
- 20 JUSTICE BREYER: What about on your side?
- 21 What about the possibility that millions of acres has
- been conveyed and there are tens of thousands or
- 23 hundreds of thousands of abandoned railroads that
- 24 property lawyers thought went to the person who bought
- 25 them, and run through somebody's house? I mean, is that

- 1 a figment of my imagination?
- 2 MR. LECHNER: No.
- 3 JUSTICE BREYER: And you would say no, it
- 4 isn't, and therefore I'm asking you is there any
- 5 empirical support anywhere for how property lawyers have
- 6 treated Great Northern, how much was conveyed,
- 7 et cetera? Anything you can say on that would be
- 8 helpful.
- 9 MR. LECHNER: I have nothing to say about
- 10 the quantity, but I know that with S.C. -- the Seventh
- 11 Circuit ruled in S.C. Johnson that the title insurance
- thought that was a landmark decision because it resolved
- 13 a lot of problems with the title insurance industry.
- Each mile of the right-of-way takes up
- 15 24 acres. At one point there were 270,000, as this
- 16 Court noted in Preseault, there was 270,000 miles of
- 17 roads at the peak in the early 1920s and about 130 of
- 18 those had been abandoned by the time of the Preseault
- 19 decision.
- 20 I want to also address the forfeiture
- 21 provision that they mention and Great Northern relied on
- 22 Section 43, 940, to confirm its conclusion that the S
- and D, these are easements because 43 U.S.C. 940 calls
- them an easement. And with respect to land that the
- 25 government still owned at the time of abandonment, they

- 1 said that the government's land would be discharged of
- 2 the easements.
- 3 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Is there any doctrine in
- 4 property law that if a right of access is granted and
- 5 its to the exclusion of all other uses, it's -- it looks
- for all purposes like absolute control, that it ceases
- 7 to be an easement and becomes a limited fee?
- I mean, is there some magic that takes place
- 9 in property law so that if there's a grant that conveys
- such total control, that it construed not to be an
- 11 easement?
- 12 MR. LECHNER: I don't know of any.
- JUSTICE KENNEDY: I've never seen it.
- MR. LECHNER: Roads, highways are
- 15 conveyed --
- 16 JUSTICE SCALIA: Have you even heard of the
- term "limited fee" until this case? I never heard it.
- MR. LECHNER: Well, I read these --
- 19 JUSTICE SCALIA: A. James Casner didn't talk to
- 20 me about limited fee.
- 21 MR. LECHNER: Well, I read these cases in law
- 22 school so I was aware of the term.
- Thank you.
- 24 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- The case is submitted.

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