

County opposes swap near McCroskey

By Ralph Bartholdt

Published: Tuesday, February 24, 2009 4:08 PM PST

A park in southern Benewah County could lose its quiet composure if the Forest Service strikes a deal with a Clearwater timber company.

The roads and trails that wind through Mary Minerva McCroskey State Park south of Tensed jog back and forth from state to federal land, but the federal parcels may be turned over to a timber company as part of a land exchange; something a group of park lovers don't want.

"We have roads that go through both state and Forest Service land," said Terry Doupe, a member of Friends of McCroskey, a group of volunteers who help with park maintenance.

A land exchange between the Forest Service and Western Pacific Timber LLC could end public use on some of the checkerboard properties that have been enjoyed for decades by the public, said Mr. Doupe, who is also a Benewah County Commissioner.

"It would cut off roads and hiking trails, bike trails, equestrian trails and access to some properties on the southern side of the park," he said.

The Forest Service would get 39,371 acres of former Plum Creek Timber Co. lands in the upper Lochsa River drainage west of the Montana border in exchange for 28,212 acres of Forest Service land on the Clearwater, Nez Perce and Idaho Panhandle National Forests. The federal land includes Benewah, Clearwater, Latah, Shoshone, Bonner, Kootenai and Idaho counties with 1,200 acres in McCroskey Park.

Brian Disney, a spokesman for the timber company, said Western Pacific has no plans to develop the land it receives, and it does not want the land in McCroskey Park if it cannot sell it to the state, or exchange it for state land.

"We want that land to stay in the hands of a state agency, or be part of the park somehow," said Mr. Disney.

Portland-based Western Pacific is strictly a timber company, not a real estate investment trust company. It actively seeks forest land for its timber value, he said.

If the company cannot make a deal with the state over the 1,200 acres, he said, it would prefer to take it out of the exchange.

"We don't need all of that," he said. "We can throw it out."

Park manager Ron Hise, said his agency is concerned that the land is part of the exchange, but he hopes the state can work a deal with the timber company to add the land to McCroskey's holdings, or, that it remains as Forest Service ground.

Mr. Doupe chimes the sentiment.

"The Forest Service is a good neighbor," he said.

The federal agency received 130 responses during a comment period that ended last month and is in the process of dissecting and replying, said Teresa Trulock, Forest Service natural resource specialist on the Clearwater National Forest.

Her agency entered into the exchange in an effort to maintain block ownership in the Lochsa area instead of a checkerboard of land mixed with private timber grounds.

"It makes management much easier," she said.

The agency is in the process of restoring the Lochsa watershed.

"It's easier to restore the whole watershed as a unit," she said.

Benewah County Commissioners are opposed to the exchange although few parcels are in the county. Most of the land involving McCroskey park is in Latah County.

"The more land that's turned over from public to private," said Mr. Doupe, "the fewer places there are for the public to recreate in."