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Uprising stymies land swap plan

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By David Johnson of the Tribune

Forest Service is working to pare the amount of trade acres in proposed Upper Lochsa Land Exchange

MOSCOW - A grassroots uprising earlier this year on the Palouse Ranger District and elsewhere has delayed, apparently altered and maybe even killed the proposed Upper Lochsa Land Exchange.

While the latter possibility is remote, District Ranger Kara Chadwick confirmed Monday a "no action" alternative is still viable.

"People always say we never choose no action," Chadwick said.

But many people, including the Latah County commissioners, have urged nixing the proposed swap altogether. And that kind of input doesn't go unnoticed, Chadwick said.

In May, the commissioners voted unanimously to oppose including any of the county's national forest acres in the exchange. The proposal, at the time, involved swapping approximately 39,000 acres of Western Pacific Timber company checkerboard land near Lolo Pass for between 22,000 and 28,000 U.S. Forest Service acres in seven northern Idaho counties. About 4,300 acres were in Latah County.

"We probably won't have a draft explaining the (new) alternatives until maybe next spring sometime," Chadwick told the commissioners during a scheduled afternoon meeting on several Forest Service issues. The draft was originally scheduled for completion this fall.

Commissioner Jack Nelson asked about the potential for combing the upper Lochsa checkerboard properties into two blocks (one for Western Pacific and the other for the Forest Service), thereby negating the need to swap any other lands.

"That is an alternative that Idaho County wanted us to look at," Chadwick said. "So we'll take a look at that."

Otherwise, Chadwick said, the Forest Service is hard at work considering earlier public comment and trying to pare the amount of proposed trade acres. She said "a lot of acres" have been dropped around Elk City, with additional acres around Elk River and some in Latah County being eliminated.

Acreage adjacent to McCroskey State Park in Latah County, Chadwick said, will most likely not be included in any final trade scenario. She said Western Timber might acquire some ground initially, but only to transfer it over to the State of Idaho as part of the park.

The proposed trade had been in the works for more than two years when a group of retired Palouse District rangers and administrators publicly voiced opposition, likening it to swapping silk purses for sows' ears. Much of the Western Pacific ground has been logged over, the retirees said, while most of the Forest Service acres have been managed for multiple uses and public access at public expense.

"During that first part, we were scoping on our proposed actions," Chadwick said of probing public sentiment, "and we got a lot of comment." Some of the meetings, conducted in various locations, became heated with people saying they feared losing some of their favorite public forest recreation sites to a private timber company. The Forest Service was criticized for failing to make the public aware of the proposal, even though all legal requirements were followed.

"We'll work with the project leader to make sure we do a better job of contacting folks," Chadwick said. Once the draft EIS is finished, she said, the document will be subject to a 45-day public comment period. In addition to receiving written comment, the Forest Service may conduct more public meetings, Chadwick said, or at least contact the various interest groups.

One such group, Friends of the Palouse Ranger District, was formed about three months ago. "This is about as grassroots as it could possibly get," spokeswoman Kathy Judson said of the group's genesis. "We had no idea that this (the proposed exchange) started in April of 2006, so it took three full years for us to hear about it. There's something really wrong with that."

Tom Reilly, former supervisor of the Clearwater National Forest, ushered the process along, but has since retired. His replacement (yet to be named) will probably make the final decision. Reilly said blocking up the checkerboard acreage is critical to management of multiple resources in the Upper Lochsa region.

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