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## Rammell revives the Sagebrush Rebellion

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**Marty Trillhaase**

To hear Republican gubernatorial candidate Rex Rammell tell it, solving Idaho's problems comes down to acquiring ownership of the massive federal lands within its borders.

"I believe these lands belong to the state of Idaho, and that the federal government has unjustly taken them from us," Rammell told the Idaho County Free Press last week. "Two-thirds of the state of Idaho is under control of the federal government, and as governor I want to change that."

The feds own 33.4 million acres of this place called Idaho, compared to the 2.6 million acres possessed by the state and the 16.3 acres million in private hands. It's the rare Idahoan who hasn't railed about federal land management policies and the even rarer Idahoan who hasn't heard someone else complain.

But the idea of acquiring state control of those lands hasn't gone far in the three decades since the original Sagebrush Rebellion erupted. As far as a political slogan, it's all right. Once someone gets serious about it, however, Idahoans become anxious. In fact, just suggesting Idaho sell off some of its federal lands to help pay for Hurricane Katrina relief brought no end of grief for former U.S. Rep. C. L. (Butch) Otter when he was running for governor three years ago.

Why?

In a nutshell, it's too expensive for a densely populated, low-income state to pull off. The feds don't spend Idaho's taxes to manage their lands in Idaho. For that, they spend tax dollars from New York, Illinois and California.

Take the Bureau of Land Management. In Idaho, it's the junior partner, possessing 12 million acres compared to 20.5 million acres held by the U.S. Forest Service. Even so, managing the BLM lands in Idaho cost \$366.4 million in 2007.

By contrast, Idaho spends about \$40 million managing its own holdings.

Now take one element of that BLM budget - wildfires. In a heavy year, such as 2007, the agency can spend \$138.5 million fighting fires on its Idaho lands.

That's 20 times more than what the state of Idaho spends battling wildfires on its own ranges and forests. How the state handles those bills, however, is illustrative of the challenge. Each year, Idaho pays fire fighting costs first. Everything else in the state budget - schools, higher education, health programs - comes after. And unlike the federal government, the state is obligated to balance its budget.

What might happen if Rammell succeeded in acquiring 12 million acres of BLM holdings for the state? How does Idaho prepare for a \$140 million wildfire fighting bill?

Presumably, the state could stockpile cash in a wildfire reserve account during economic booms - but that would leave schools and everything else depleted. In a tough economy coupled with an expensive wildfire, budgeting for schools and state programs would be disastrous.

There are other options, of course.

Rammell could ratchet up extractive industries - logging, mining, grazing - on these lands to raise money. To balance the budget, he'd ultimately be forced to liquidate some public lands, selling out to the highest bidder.

Anyone who has ever been thrown off corporate forests or charged an access fee to remain already knows where that prospect leads. - M.T.