

Reality ruptures land task force's cocoon

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho's Capitol is a political cocoon where facts and reality are filtered out.

So when Idaho lawmakers became infatuated with former Utah lawmaker Ken Ivory's notion that the state could compel Uncle Sam to part with more than 30 million acres of federal land, they plowed right ahead.

But as a legislative public lands task force headed by Rep. Lawrence Denney, R-Midvale, and Sen. Chuck Winder, R-Boise, has begun venturing outside that cloistered world, reality keeps getting in the way.

Monday, leaders of Idaho's Indian tribes came out against such a transfer and they hold some trump cards. Their treaties extend access to federal lands outside the formal reservations. These rights include hunting, fishing and sacred sites.

Add to that a body of legal precedents and evolving national political and moral sympathy with the plight of America's native people.

If the Nez Perce Indian Tribe can block one megaload from making its way down U.S. Highway 12, how in the world can Idaho acquire ownership of federal assets amid unified tribal opposition?

The message didn't get much better when logging industry representatives stepped up. Their response was polite, but unmistakable.

Yes, they said, there's a problem with overbearing federal regulations, antiquated environmental laws and over-litigious environmentalists. It's getting in the way of harvesting trees.

But the feds aren't going to hand over the lands. Why waste more time on a non-starter?

"We know that change has to come from Washington, D.C., and likely won't come from Boise," said former state Rep. Jerry Deckard, R-Eagle, speaking for 400 log-hauling contractors.

Idaho Forest Group Vice President Robert Boeh seemed to echo the theme, stressing the need to open up access to the 23.5 percent of national forest lands designated for logging. His remedy was federal legislation, not state confrontation.

There you have a pair of rather inconvenient facts on the heels of a third - last month's blistering assessment that Idaho could lose \$392 million a year managing these federal lands. Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, assigned the objective, nonpartisan, credible Congressional Research Service to quantify what just three federal agencies - the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land

Management and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - spent managing their Idaho holdings. It was the first time anyone had quantified the cost and it may be low by another \$100 million.

Amid such compelling evidence against a lands transfer, Denney and Winder ought to ask themselves whether they really need another year.

Why not embark in a dramatically new direction?

How about spending time with the Clearwater Basin Collaborative to learn how people on both ends of the natural resource spectrum are breaking through the policy paralysis?

Why not begin exploring joint state-federal management pilot projects?

Using the collaborative model, why not seek a unified Idaho plan for updating the nation's environmental laws and public lands management system?

Here's the choice Denney and Winder face: They can either continue this charade, offering little more than slogans to Idaho's struggling rural economies while scoring political points for themselves.

Or they can confront realities, do some heavy lifting and solve a few problems. - M.T.