

Forest management should turn on facts, not ideology

Raul Labrador/Lewiston Tribune op-ed

In the laboratory of ideas, results should count.

Recently, I introduced the Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act, House Resolution 2316, which would set aside up to 2 percent of the 193 million acres in the national forest system for state and local management. Sadly, some critics seem uninterested in whether local management of federal lands might restore forest health, reduce catastrophic fires and revive rural economies.

The Lewiston Tribune's Marty Trillhaase recently wrote that the bill "might sound appealing" to those living in one of Idaho's struggling timber communities. Indeed it does - the idea came from a bipartisan group of county commissioners in the 1st Congressional District.

Idahoans are alarmed by our forest crisis. Under federal management, they've watched timber harvest crash since the 1990s. Consequences include high unemployment, erosion of the local tax base and essential services, and devastating fires.

Thirty percent of the nation's national forests are at high risk for catastrophic wildfire, according to the Forest Service. These fires damage water quality, wildlife and property, undermining the government's stewardship duty. Worst of all, lives are lost. In the last 20 years, there have been close to 350 wildfire-related fatalities in the U.S.

Working with local officials, I first introduced the bill in 2012. It passed the House in 2013, but wasn't considered in the then-Democratic Senate. Now that Republicans control the Senate, prospects for final passage are improved.

Perhaps that explains some of the overheated rhetoric, including claims I'm doing the bidding of corporate interests hungry to buy up our public lands and lock out the American people.

One representative of an environmental group called the pilot projects in my bill a "slippery slope," saying, "... If you can't get title to the lands today, at least go for management of them so tomorrow you can make a case for title."

Translation: Opponents of the forest products industry fear that local management will prove superior to control from Washington, D.C. Such evidence, of course, would boost efforts in Congress to reform federal land management.

New data shows the potential. In a March report, the Property and Environment Research Center compared state and federal management. PERC found that Idaho, Montana, New Mexico and Arizona earn an average of \$14.51 for every dollar spent on state trust land management.

The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management generate only 73 cents in return for every dollar spent on federal land management.

But the critics don't care about facts. They're making an ideological argument - federal control is better than local - not one based on what's best for the land and the people.

I think most Americans trust outcomes. If it turns out governors and their advisory committees - working in consultation with Indian tribes - do a better job managing our forests, the federal government should transfer that authority.

With an \$18 trillion deficit, Congress and the American people are hungry for ideas to cut spending. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office projects my bill would return a net of \$64 million to the U.S. Treasury over the first eight years. Across the forest system, the savings would be very significant.

I believe local management is an antidote for the sickness that ails our forests and rural communities. That includes more harvest and efficient salvage following fires. It also means higher-paying jobs and fewer devastating fires.

Just as a scientific hypothesis is tested in the laboratory, my bill tests the hypothesis that state control is better for forest management. It's a shame that critics aren't interested in learning what works best for the health of our forests and rural communities.

Labrador, R-Idaho, represents Idaho's 1st Congressional District.