

State land ownership brings fences and fees

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The federal government owns 33.4 million acres of land within the state of Idaho.

And if you're so inclined, you can walk on just about every acre of it.

These are your public lands. You have access to them. Usually at no charge.

Same thing applies if the state of Idaho ever gets ownership of those lands, right?

Not necessarily.

Skeptics have argued that the cost of managing the federal lands - nearly \$500 million a year if you include firefighting costs, according to a recent Congressional Research Service study - would bankrupt the state. It would have no choice but to liquidate the holdings and sell them off to the highest bidder.

For the sake of argument, however, let's say public lands transfer advocates are right and Idaho could retain ownership.

You still have reason to worry.

Just look at the way Idaho manages 2.4 million acres of its own lands.

According to the Idaho Statesman's Rocky Barker, you can do pretty much whatever you like - hiking, fishing and exploring - but only on 70 percent of that property.

The rest is off limits.

Idaho's constitution obligates the state Land Board to maximize its financial return from those lands to support public schools and other beneficiaries. That's why you may see tree farms fenced off. Ditto for mining claims or cottage site leases. If it's a choice between making money or allowing people to roam around, making money comes first.

And easy access to the remaining 70 percent may soon be a thing of the past. Barker reported that state lands department Director Tom Schultz is raising the prospect of imposing recreation fees. That could mean directly charging visitors. Or it could involve leasing lands to the Fish and Game Department or the Department of Parks and Recreation. To pay the cost of the leases, those agencies would implement their own fees.

Says Barker, the policy of allowing people to access state lands for free is "unsustainable."

It could get worse.

The Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell last week reported the land board is entertaining the idea of leasing 1,300 acres near Idaho Falls for a private pheasant hunting operation. Given the constitutional mandate to maximize the financial return on those lands, it's not difficult to imagine the land board - however reluctantly - going along.

"Here's the problem: If somebody offers us \$100,000 for a section of land, we have to manage this for maximum best financial gain that we have for endowments," said Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, who chairs the land board.

So what happens if people such as Utah state Rep. Ken Ivory and Idaho County Commission Chairman Jim Chmelik get their way and the feds hand over more than 33 million acres to the state?

The same economics will apply. The state would be under the gun to cover the costs of managing its newly acquired lands. A recent University of Idaho study said it would take historic logging levels - and a robust timber market - just to keep the state in the black.

Elsewhere, you can bet trailhead fees, if not exclusive leases, would be in the picture.

So will politics. Otter and other state officials tend to see eye-to-eye with ranchers, timber companies and miners - not backpackers, anglers or even hunters. In a choice between profits and public access, profits win.

If the state managed the federal lands the way it handles its own holdings, you'd be shut out of about 10 million acres while charged new fees to visit the rest.

Who does that serve?

Not the ordinary Idahoan, for whom being able to enter a national forest at will is part of his DNA.

Maybe that's why the latest installment of Idaho's Sagebrush Rebellion is petering out.

Federal public land ownership and management keeps looking better and better, doesn't it? - M.T.