

Federal land ownership is Idaho's least bad alternative

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Ask Idahoans whether they'd prefer the federal government or their own state to manage the public lands and you'll get a predictable answer: Most would support having the state in charge.

Ask if they'd be willing to endure the costs such a transfer would require and you'd get an entirely different response.

So reports the latest Boise State University Public Policy Survey.

To the first question, 56.3 percent said they'd favor "transferring land owned by the federal government to the state government for management."

The second inquiry included this detail: "Transferring management of those lands to the state government in Idaho could potentially cost the state millions per year in taxpayer dollars."

Support for the transfer collapsed to 39.3 percent.

All of which suggests Idahoans are not allowing their ideological predispositions to get in the way of factual arguments - at least not when it comes to management of the public lands.

That's not new. As Idahoans have wrestled with this issue decade after decade, they generally conclude that whatever its flaws, federal ownership offers them the best guarantee of access to the public lands in their backyard.

In fact, the most recent Dan Jones and Associates poll shows 48 percent oppose the idea of moving federal lands to state control; 42 percent support the idea.

For the sake of argument, however, say one of these polls pressed Idahoans with questions such as these:

- Transferring federal lands to state control would involve not just millions of dollars but hundreds of millions.

Three years ago, Congressman Mike Simpson asked the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service to examine what it would cost to manage U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife assets in Idaho. It put the price at \$392 million - and the study did not include \$101 million also spent fighting fires on Idaho's federal lands that year.

How would you come up with the funds to pay these costs? Would you be willing to pay more in state taxes? Or would you accept deep cuts in public schools, higher education or health programs?

- As part of the Legislature's public lands task force review, the University of Idaho Policy Analysis Group looked for ways the state could acquire the federal lands without incurring crippling costs.

Assuming the state could log these lands at levels not seen since 1968, 1969 and 1976 - and got a reasonably high rate of return - the state might earn \$24 million.

Would you be willing to aggressively log forests, even if it means giving other programs such as recreation a lower priority?

- Assume higher taxes won't get approved and the public won't accept deep cuts in education and health programs. That leaves one other option - liquidating some public lands and selling them to the highest bidder. Would that be acceptable to you?
- When Idahoans have come together, they've struck compromises among themselves and the federal land managers. Simpson passed a measure that preserved wilderness while freeing up other lands in the Boulder-White Cloud range. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, forged consensus on the Owyhee Canyonlands wilderness. And people on both sides of the natural resource spectrum are reaching agreements on new logging and forest restoration in the Clearwater Basin Collaborative.

Would you like to hear more about that approach?