

Group: Idaho officials can't be counted on to not sell off state lands

Report finds state has already sold 41% of its property

Eric Barker/Lewiston Tribune

A Wilderness Society report issued Wednesday says Idaho officials have sold 1.7 million acres of endowment land since statehood, or about 41 percent of state-owned property.

The environmental group argues the report, produced from records obtained from the Idaho Department of Lands, shows there is a clear danger that the state would sell off land if it were transferred from the federal government - as some legislators have pushed for.

"The reason we did this is because proponents of giving lands to the state have said many times, emphatically, that access would not change and in no way would land be sold," said Brad Brooks, deputy regional director of the Wilderness Society at Boise. "Based on our research, if past behavior is any indication of future behavior, I think it's hard to deny that public lands would be sold off if they were given to the state."

According to the report, Idaho's government acquired 4.25 million acres of land when it became a state in 1890. Since then, it has sold an average of 13,500 acres per year, including 100,000 since 2000. Brooks said most of that land has gone to timber companies such as Potlatch Corp. and Boise Cascade, and to large livestock ranchers. Other buyers have included mining companies, private individuals, a country club at Twin Falls and the Flat Rock Club, a private fly fishing club on the Henrys Fork of the Snake River.

Some Idaho lawmakers and rural county commissioners support the notion that Idaho and other Western states should have been given all of the federal government's holdings within their borders at the time of statehood. That idea has also been touted by national politicians such as U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, who suspended his presidential bid Tuesday. Cruz supporter Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, has introduced legislation that would transfer management - but not ownership - of large swaths of federal lands to states.

Utah has led the effort to transfer federal lands to state ownership and has a pending lawsuit against the federal government seeking to acquire millions of acres of U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management property. The Idaho Legislature toyed with the idea but ultimately declined to go the same route.

Rep. Judy Boyle, R-Midvale, is one lawmaker who has advocated for the takeover of federal land. She suggested public lands are no safer from the auction block under federal ownership, nor is access guaranteed when the federal government is the landlord.

"There is nothing to prevent the federal government right now from selling that land to pay off the national debt," she said. "They are the ones restricting access to the federal land, not the state, and they are the ones burning up the land and polluting the streams and polluting the air, not the state."

Boyle said she can relate to fears that the state might sell off land if it were to acquire significant acreage from the federal government.

"I can understand their fear and I have the same one," she said. "I do not want to see our land sold. My family and I have enjoyed our public lands and we have been disgusted to see the access closed off more and more every year and burned up."

Brooks said the report shows the fears are justified.

"For the Wilderness Society, this is one of the most fundamental issues to anybody who loves and uses public lands," he said. "Whether you are a wilderness recreationist or a snowmobiler, we all use public land."

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