

If Idaho County says no, who's going to say yes?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If there's any place that ought to welcome the divestiture of federal holdings, you'd think it would be Idaho County.

Uncle Sam's ownership of 83 percent of Idaho County's land mass - and the red tape that comes with it - is choking off economic opportunity. At least, that's what the locals - and their elected leaders - say. So it's no surprise candidates who advocate a federal land transfer find much of their support in Idaho County.

Two years ago, Republican gubernatorial challenger Russ Fulcher got 53.5 percent of Idaho County's vote in the GOP primary; incumbent Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter won 41 percent.

Idaho County Commissioner Jim Chmelik - who waged his entire GOP primary election campaign against incumbent Lt. Gov. Brad Little on getting ownership of federal lands - claimed 59.2 percent of Idaho County's vote.

First District Congressman Raul Labrador, who has sought to launch a pilot program to put the state in charge of national forest land, wins big here. In his last re-election, Labrador claimed nearly 74 percent of Idaho County's general election vote.

Of course, the transfer is little more than a campaign rallying cry. Nobody really expects the transfer to come off.

You can't sue the feds into submission. Idaho's Constitution, the U.S. Constitution and federal case law give Congress absolute control to dispose of the federal lands.

Congress is not predisposed to do hand them over.

And if it ever happened, the economics wouldn't work. Either the state would go about \$500 million in the hole or eke out a small profit by be aggressively logging the lands at levels not seen since the late 1960s or mid-1970s - and then hoping the timber market stays healthy.

But if ever Idaho County had a blueprint of a land transfer proposal, it came in the form of the proposed swap between Western Pacific Timber Co., and the Forest Service.

It made sense for the government to acquire 39,000 acres of WPT-owned land at the headwaters of the Lochsa River. Because it's owned in a checkerboard pattern, the land can't be properly managed - which means little can be done to effectively check the spring runoff washing sediment into the river and threatening endangered steelhead and bull trout.

And the trade-off appeared to meet the county's needs. The Forest Service would trade off about 20,000 acres, mostly near Grangeville and Harpster to acquire the WPT lands.

The transaction would help the county's slim property tax base and, presumably, generate jobs and economic activity.

WPT was prepared to sign easements guaranteeing recreationists would not be thrown off the land.

Feasible in principle.

Lousy in practice - as U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, discovered when he brought the idea to a contentious public hearing in Grangeville last November. The protests did not let up. By the time people finished contacting his office, Risch said 97 percent opposed the idea.

Whatever WPT was selling, they weren't buying.

To them, it was trading access guaranteed under public ownership to a corporate promise. However small the risk, it was still gambling with a prized hunting spot, a favorite fishing stream, a trail, a place of scenic solitude or the place their grandparents took them camping.

Maybe it was emotional. Or cognitive dissonance. But it was too much for Risch, who Thursday threw in the towel and discarded any attempt toward pursuing a land swap in Congress.

"The USFS land is public land, and the owners' view, particularly those living closest to the land, should be considered," Risch wrote. "A critical mass of consensus is essential to resolving this issue. That does not exist now and is not even close at this time."

If Risch's retreat wasn't clear enough, on Tuesday Idaho County Republican primary election voters retired Chmelik - who has made a second career of pursuing the federal land transfer agenda.

So here's the question: If you can't pull off a land swap at the transfer movement's ground zero, where can you? - M.T.