

Would Idaho treat federal lands better than its own?

Marty Trillhaase, Lewiston Tribune

Give retiring state Rep. Linden Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, his due. In the entire discussion about whether Idaho should acquire roughly 34 million acres of federal land, nobody squared the issue more succinctly.

"Over the last several years, there's been quite a bit of support (in the Legislature) for the theory that at least some federal lands should be managed by the states," Bateman said during a hearing last March. "But most of the feedback I get is in opposition. It's almost like people aren't conscious of their own citizenship. They don't trust the people they elect; they're more inclined to trust federal bureaucrats."

Bateman got the message: Idahoans believe their state would go broke trying to manage those lands. The properties may not be as well tended. And they fear Idaho's business-oriented leaders would wind up liquidating the choicest lots to the highest bidders - and locking them out in the process.

They already knew the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, at Congressman Mike Simpson's request, looked into the matter and projected the state would spend almost \$500 million a year managing and fighting fires on U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife assets in Idaho.

Next, the University of Idaho Policy Analysis Group figured the only way Idaho could eke out a small profit would be to log those lands at levels not seen since 1968, 1969 and 1976 and then get a healthy rate of return ad finitum.

They've also watched state management of its own lands. Assurances to the contrary, active logging and road-building did not spare state-owned forests from last summer's devastating fires.

Rather than getting market-based rates from the people renting 521 cottage sites on Payette and Priest lakes, the Land Board cut sweetheart deals. Eventually the Idaho Supreme Court found the practice unconstitutional, and the Land Board is selling off those sites.

Now they've discovered something else: The state has been selling some of the land it already owns.

According to Brad Brooks, deputy regional director of the Wilderness Society at Boise, the state started out with 4.25 million acres when it became a state in 1890. Since then, he says, it has sold 1.76 million acres.

While short on details, Brooks' report tells you this much: These land sales did not occur when you'd expect - at the time of statehood when Idaho would have needed start-up cash. In fact, the state's founders placed obstacles in the path of land liquidation. So for its first couple of decades as a state, Idaho held onto its land.

It was only in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s that the public's most valuable cropland wound up in the hands of politically influential individuals and companies - leaving the state with rangeland that barely pays for itself.

Since the turn of the century, Brooks says, the state has disposed of about 100,000 acres, which works out to about 4 percent of the state's holdings. That's not necessarily a lot. But if the state acquired 34 million federal acres and disposed of 4 percent, about 1.3 million acres would be in private hands.

If Bateman wonders why Idahoans doubt their state leaders on this point, here's one more reason.
- M.T.