

Look at who will keep your public lands public

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The federal government is never going to hand over millions of acres of lands to the Western states.

If you had any doubts, consider how Montana Congressman Ryan Zinke - President-elect Donald Trump's nominee to head up the Department of Interior - spent his summer.

On June 15, the House Resources Committee was marking up Alaska Congressman Don Young's State National Forest Management Act. It sought to transfer as much as 2 million acres of U.S. Forest Service land to state ownership.

Idaho 1st District Congressman Raul Labrador voted for it. But Zinke not only opposed the measure; he took pains to make certain everyone at home knew it.

"I'm starting to wonder how many times I have to tell these guys in leadership I'm not going to allow Montana's public lands to be sold or given away," Zinke said.

Zinke piled on. The Young bill, he said, added "insult to injury," by failing to include any guarantees that exchanged lands would remain in public ownership.

"Two million acres is a lot, even in Montana," he said. "That's the Flathead National Forest, poof, gone. Lolo National Forest, gone. We use our land for hunting, fishing, hiking and to create jobs. Our outdoor economy is a billion-dollar economic engine for the state that creates jobs. The federal government needs to do a much better job of managing our resources, but the sale or transfer of our land is an extreme proposal and I won't tolerate it."

The following month, the Republican National Convention gathered in Cleveland to endorse a platform plank calling on Congress to "immediately pass universal legislation providing for a timely and orderly mechanism requiring the federal government to convey certain federally controlled lands to the states. We call upon all national and state leaders and representatives to exert their utmost power of influence to urge the transfer of those lands."

Zinke's response was to resign as an RNC delegate and, again, trumpet his decision to the voters at home.

"What I saw was a platform that was more divisive than uniting," he told the Billings Gazette. "At this point, I think it's better to show leadership."

That puts Zinke in the mainstream, both at home and other Western states such as Idaho. The cost of managing those holdings - and putting out fires - would dwarf local budgets and, in short order, you'd see states forced to liquidate, selling off land and public access to the highest bidders.

But it isn't what House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Rob Bishop, R-Utah, wants to hear. He's still in a state of denial: "There is a whole lot of spin on what (Zinke) does and doesn't believe and it's coming from interest groups that want to spin his perspective," Bishop told the Salt Lake Tribune.

It isn't what the American Lands Council - whose leader Ken Ivory conned Idaho lawmakers into taking a two-year-long trip down the land transfer rabbit hole - wants to hear, either.

"We are pursuing an exciting legislative path for incremental state acquisition of federal lands that is flexible, workable and protects our public lands in a sensible way," the ALC told its supporters. "And now we have a president who is much more inclined to support our proposed plan for greatly improved public land management than we have had in a very long time."

But it is what Donald Trump Jr., wants to hear. Junior, you might recall, made this point during a brief campaign stop in Boise: "We want to make sure that public lands stay public. ... I'm a big outdoorsman, I'm a big hunter. When I lived out here, that's what I hunted on, public land, and I want to make sure that the next generation has that ability to do that."

When it came to picking an Interior secretary, Junior sat in on interviews and telephoned potential candidates, according to the Hill newspaper.

So who had the president-elect's ear when he decided to pick Zinke over Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rogers, R-Wash., or even Labrador, who also made a trip to Trump Tower?

You guessed it.

Checkmate. - M.T.