

Isn't something about this movie familiar?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

About the only thing more cyclical on the public scene than the James Bond film franchise is the Idaho land grab phenomenon.

Every 17 years or so, a group of Idaho politicians jump up and down about the injustice of having so much of their state owned and managed by the federal government.

Thirty-five years ago, the natural resource extraction industries were up in arms about the new federal land management act, the roadless forest inventories, a Supreme Court decision extending federal ownership over wild horses and burros, and then-Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus.

Seventeen years ago, the angst was over Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, President Clinton's alleged "War on the West," and a federal attempt to update the Mining Act of 1872.

In each case, the locals mounted a campaign for state ownership under the banner of something like the Sagebrush Rebellion. Then ordinary citizens would discover how state ownership would lead to more lands falling into private hands, choking off public access. And the issue would go away.

Well, here we go again. Early next month, the Idaho Legislature's public lands task force will forge ahead into the issue.

Except there's something missing.

Where's the local outrage igniting the rebellion? If anything, you've got cooperation, not confrontation between industry and conservationists. Groups such as the Clearwater Basin Collaborative are breaking through the policy paralysis of the last generation or two, freeing up national forests for logging while designating other lands and streams for protection. And on the most contentious issue of the day, wolf management, the Obama administration backed state control just as the Bush administration had.

And where's the public yearning for a change?

Commissioned by the Idaho Outdoor Business Council, Republican pollster Bob Moore reported the following:

- 97 percent agreed that "public lands, including forests, national parks, monuments and wildlife areas, are an essential part of Idaho's quality of life."
- 87 percent supported the idea that "preserving Idaho's roadless areas is critical to maintaining hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreational activities that are important to our way of life."

- 73 percent subscribed to the statement that "one of the things our federal government does well is protect and preserve our national heritage through the management of forests, national parks and other public lands."

Moore conducted his poll in early August 2012 - during the height of the firefighting season. If there was ever a time for Idahoans to vent any frustrations with federal land management policies, wouldn't it be then?

So what's going on here? There's no national policy blowup and no grassroots disaffection with federal land management.

Here's a guess: The ideological wing of the Idaho GOP-dominated Legislature is going off on a tangent. The echo chamber in Boise doesn't need public sentiment to move. All it needs is Utah Rep. Ken Ivory and his questionable legal premise that the state should just demand Uncle Sam relinquish its public lands.

Idaho lawmakers fell all over themselves. They created the task force, but not before they already agreed to a conclusion:

"The state of Idaho urges the United States Congress in the most strenuous terms to engage in good faith communication, cooperation, coordination and consultation with the state of Idaho regarding the transfer of public lands directly to the state."

Come on.

Do you really think Congress is going to take lands owned by more than 313 million American citizens and turn them over to a state of no more than 1.5 million?

Do you really think the federal courts will reverse two centuries of case law just for Idaho's convenience?

We all know how this ends.

Some lawmakers will flap their gums. If they talk too much, the voters will rein them in.

And then, like James Bond, they'll promise to return for the next installment. - M.T.