

Candidate Smith is correct: Idaho should control federal lands within our border

By Wayne Hoffman

The other day, Idaho Statesman columnist/reporter/press secretary to the political establishment, Dan Popkey, smacked GOP congressional challenger Bryan Smith for berating a federal welfare program known as Payments In Lieu of Taxes (PILT).

The program is a congressional creation (read: dubious), but western communities have come to depend on PILT funding, such as it is. PILT provides a revenue stream to counties that have no ability to generate tax income because much of the land in the county belongs to the national government.

The program, noted Popkey in his words, means "Idaho's 44 counties will receive \$26.3 million from PILT to compensate for 32.6 million acres in federal ownership."

Wrote Popkey, "Smith dismissed the program as 'begging for crumbs' and said he would focus on convincing Congress to 'give back' federal land to Idaho and other states."

Smith dismissed the federal handout, so Popkey decided to dismiss Smith: "Smith, making his first race for public office, may be unfamiliar with the broad influence of county elected officials who provide every-day services across Idaho."

But Smith is right, and if you've done the math already, you know that PILT rewards counties with a measly 80 cents per acre. In return, counties are rewarded with a system that limits the use of public lands, resulting in gross mismanagement of public lands, devastating wildfires, a lack of jobs and slim opportunities. With fewer and fewer jobs and lacking real opportunity, grown children leave rural Idaho for greener pastures. But hey, we've got our 80 cents per acre. Thanks, Uncle Sam!

Furthermore, this is not how things were meant to be. At statehood, Idaho and other western states were promised that the federal government, at some point in the future, would dispose of its land holdings in our states. Such lands, with vast repositories of natural resources, were to be put to productive use, resulting in revenue generation not only for Idaho's rural communities, but for the schools necessary to educate the masses.

Congress unilaterally abandoned the policy of land disposal in the 1970s, and since then, the federal government has worked to bring federal land holdings under national monument and park designations. Smith argues, accurately, that states are left with a pittance. PILT is a western welfare program. And since reporters, columnists and editorial writers beat up on any politician who questions the sanity of PILT, it's a form of hush money.

Popkey wants you to believe that Smith should be embarrassed for suggesting an end to the PILT entitlement. I'd disagree. One thing the federal government is good at is using the treasury and wads of cash to create sustained poverty and dependence.

Left in the wake of the government's charity are broken families, ramshackle tenements, the absence of both good-paying jobs and the promise that children will have the same financial insecurity of their parents.

Just as many American inner cities, Appalachia, New Orleans and Detroit have become financially and emotionally vacuous at the hands of federal government subsistence, such could be Idaho's fate. Idaho and its rural communities should get to enjoy the full breadth of prosperity and opportunity that this country has to offer.

But that will never happen as long as Congress, and leftist political writers who explain away congressional policies, defend government welfare as a quality substitute for productivity.

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