

# What is it about this picture Chmelik can't see?

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Here's what private land ownership looks like: A pair of billionaire Texans, Farris and Dan Wilks, acquire ownership of 38,000 acres on the Joseph Plains in Idaho County.

Previous owners - the Evergreen Land and Cattle Co., owned by the Hitchcock family, and the Robbins-France Ranch - permitted access to an area prized by hunters.

The Wilks brothers say no.

And if the Cisco, Texas-based owners aren't returning Lewiston Tribune reporter Kathy Hedberg's calls, you can bet they aren't talking to anyone else from Idaho who has been affected by their decision.

All of which should give pause to anyone infatuated with the idea of taking control of federal lands.

At least with U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management assets, you have land managers located nearby. They're part of the community. Their spouses have jobs. Their children are attending area schools. When the phone rings, they answer it.

You usually don't need their permission to access public lands.

Every so often, groups of people grow frustrated with federal red tape and insist the state of Idaho not only could do a better job of running those lands, but is actually entitled to ownership.

For two years, a legislative task force flirted with taking the federal government to court. It abandoned the notion because the committee's own lawyer confirmed what Attorney General Lawrence Wasden's staff said much earlier: The U.S. Constitution, the Idaho Constitution, federal court precedents and congressional history left the state without a case.

For the sake of argument, however, suppose the state succeeded in acquiring those lands. Then what?

A Congressional Research Service study obtained by Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, concluded that Idaho would need between \$392 million and \$500 million to manage those resources.

The University of Idaho also conceded the state would lose money unless it accelerated logging operations to levels not seen since 1976 - and got top dollar for the lumber.

Factor into this equation what it costs to fight fires on state-managed lands - \$61 million and climbing - and you know what comes next.

The state would begin a massive liquidation.

Picking up the properties would not be local mom and pops, but out-of-state land barons.

Starting to get the picture?

That's more than you can say for Idaho County Commissioner Jim Chmelik.

Two years ago, Chmelik waged a race for lieutenant governor largely on the idea of getting state control of the federal lands. In the GOP primary against incumbent Brad Little, Chmelik carried 33.2 percent of the vote.

Chmelik has been an ally of Utah state Rep. Ken Ivory and the American Lands Council. The Idaho County commissioners have contributed \$5,000 to the lands council each of the past three years.

And Chmelik launched his own Western Landmark Foundation to help him persuade county commissioners across the West to press for local control of federal lands.

Perhaps that explains why Chmelik seemed oblivious to the concerns of his own constituents who found themselves locked out of the Joseph Plains by its private owners.

They focused on the access public lands offer.

Chmelik seemed to be more cognizant about the fact that public lands pay no taxes.

"As long as (the Wilks brothers) pay their taxes, I'm not worried," he said.

Is he in denial or what?