

Idaho's would-be governors are out of step

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Somehow our public lands-loving state is facing a 2018 gubernatorial race with four GOP candidates touting transfer of public land management to the state.

Are our GOP gubernatorial candidates borrowing their platform planks on land issues from the National Republican Committee's GOP Platform?

At the very least, the candidates - Boise developer and medical doctor Tommy Ahlquist, former state senator and 2014 gubernatorial candidate Russ Fulcher, U.S. Congressman Raul Labrador, and Lt. Gov. Brad Little - seem to misunderstand the desires of the people they're hoping to represent.

A Boise State University poll, released in January, listed public land issues as one of the top 10 main issues concerning Idahoans.

Just how much do Idahoans love their public lands?

Anecdotally, a lot. In March 2016, two Utah lawmakers and a lawyer named George Wentz visited Boise to talk to state legislators about potentially joining a lawsuit they hoped would allow the state to take control of federal lands.

It didn't go well.

Hunters, anglers, conservationists and other public land enthusiasts repeatedly heckled the men from Utah and even laughed out loud at the suggestion that "surface estate" will be protected while the land's resources are mined.

That's right. The Utah faction was literally laughed out of the state. Idaho's lawmakers chose not to sign on for the lawsuit.

Then there was the whole blockbuster public lands rally in Boise this year. Over 2,000 Idahoans stood in the cold on the lawn of the Statehouse to show their support for continued access to the public lands in their state. In a state with a population of 1.6 million people spread out over 83,569 square miles, that number should make any politician sit up and pay attention.

Even in a state that is notoriously difficult to poll, hard numbers bear this out.

Although a Utah-based marketing and polling firm, Dan Jones & Associates, conducted a survey that showed 73 percent of Idahoans polled favored state land management over federal, a more nuanced examination of the issue strongly contradicts these findings.

The Boise State survey crafted two questions and asked each question to separate groups of 500 Idahoans.

The first question was nearly identical to the question asked by Dan Jones & Associates. But the second question had more information. Those surveyed were told that Idaho is made up of 60 percent of federal lands.

Then they were asked if they supported turning over management to the state when given the following information: "Transferring management of those lands to the state government in Idaho could potentially cost the state millions per year in taxpayer dollars."

Approval of state management dropped 20 points, going from 56.3 percent to 35.3 percent.

Because outside concerns of losing state-owned and operated public lands permanently through leases or sales (1.2 million acres of the 3 million acres granted at Idaho's statehood have been sold off) there is the issue of the unknown, but certainly very high cost of having the state maintain it.

It's not too early in the gubernatorial race to be worried that four candidates have expressed support in some way, shape or form of bringing management to the state. We encourage the candidates to think hard on this issue and make arguments for how state control would benefit the citizens of Idaho without loss of access, and without loss of funding for the basic needs of the state.

It will be a tight race. Will any of these four candidates break away with a more nuanced, Idaho-centric stance on public lands issues?

It's never too late to consider it.