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Barron: Who pays for the wildfires?

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Can the state afford the costs of fighting wildfires if it takes over management of certain federal lands in Wyoming?

That is only one of the questions legislative committees need to answer as part of a \$75,000 study of the issues surrounding a potential transfer of public lands management from the federal government.

The study is the fifth ranked priority study for the Joint Interim Committee on Agriculture, Public Lands and Water Resources.

Although the report on the study results isn't due until November 2016, chairman Sen. Gerald Geis, R-Worland, said the committee already has discussed possible transfer of some lands in Thunder Basin National Grasslands.

This vast area is in northeastern Wyoming in the Powder River Basin, between the Big Horn Mountains and the Black Hills.

The area offers hiking, hunting, fishing and bird and wildlife viewing. Camping is allowed, but there are no developed campgrounds.

Geis said the committee also is interested in looking at federal lands near Fontenelle Reservoir on the Green River in southwest Wyoming.

"I don't know if we could ever handle all of the federal lands," he said last week. "I think we could do a better job than the federal government."

The bill authorizing the study created considerable controversy in the legislative session that ended in March, largely because of worries over access.

The bill, Senate File 56, was sponsored by the Select Federal Natural Resource Management Committee.

A committee member, Sen. Eli Bebout, R-Riverton, said he believes the state can do a better job of managing the public lands for less money.

Wyoming, he said, has missed opportunities for increased minerals revenue because the federal permitting process for energy development is so slow.

To mollify sportsmen and other groups, the bill requires that any plan developed by the state Office of State Lands and Investments will guarantee public access for the lands for hunting, fishing and recreation.

The Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based libertarian think tank, earlier developed models to replace land management by federal agencies with private interests.

In 2000 Congress adopted one of the institute's ideas for the 89,000-acre Valles Caldera National Preserve in New Mexico.

Critics of the federal government believed the experiment would be the end of the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service in the West, according to an article in High Country News.

Although Wyoming's study involves transfer of the federal lands to state control, not to private interests, some of the problems are similar.

A Texas oil family sold its property atop a dormant volcano near Santa Fe to the federal government.

Congress passed the Valles Caldera Preservation Act in 2000 that put management of the land under a "Trust" rather than with traditional federal agencies.

The law mandated the preserve to become financially self-sufficient by 2015. To replace federal appropriations, the Trust was to use income from recreation fees, resource extraction and any other source that could be found.

Initially, Congress directed the trust to pay for all wild fires and fire operations at the preserve out of its own budget.

Later, a congressional amendment returned responsibility for fire fighting to the Forest Service.

Soon after, two large fires burned 53,000 acres in the preserve and cost the federal government \$56 million dollars in suppression costs alone.

Despite the efforts of everyone involved for 14 years, the preserve never made enough from from hunting, grazing and tourism to pay even one-third of its bills.

The experiment ultimately collapsed and the New Mexico congressional delegation got the Valles Caldera National Preserve transferred to the National Park Service, the High Country News article said.

For those who want states to take over federal land, one question to be answered first is whether the state will pay for the costs of fighting major fires.

A second is whether the state will continue to subsidize ranching. And third is whether the state will protect and restore wildlife habitat and archeological sites.

The study report should have those answers.