



## Firefighting dilemma reveals GOP's problem with lands stance

By Judy Ferro  
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August is wildfire season, and this year is no exception. A recent AP article states “some 30 large fires are burning their way through federal and state forests in California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho.” Drought-stricken California is suffering the worst with 209 square miles burned so far, 44 percent higher than usual for early August.

Budgeted firefighting funds will run out by the end of the month. Agricultural Secretary Tom Vilsack is asking for another \$615,000 for this year and next. Some are suggesting that wildfires be funded through federal agencies that deal with floods and hurricanes.

Perhaps that's why advocates for taking over federal lands have been quiet all week.

Not that wildfires deter them. They claim Idaho would act so responsibly that wildfires would no longer be a problem.

I've heard one zealous advocate say, “Once we cut the trees, the fires will go away.” The movement's leaders, however, stick to the vaguer language of Article X of the Idaho Republican platform: “The Idaho Republican Party believes ... we need to limit and reduce the amount of land owned or administered by the federal government. We believe Idaho should manage and administer all state and federal lands.”

Right now the feds give counties

\$58 million each year to compensate for timber cutting, an amount that nearly equals the estimated \$50 to \$75 million made from the sales. They spend another \$390 million or so annually managing lands within Idaho's borders.

So Idaho's Republican leadership wants to rid the federal government of this burden and rely on “better management.” By early July, the Legislature's Federal Land Task Force, headed by Sen. Chuck Winder and Rep. Lawrence Denney, had spent \$41,726 for a lawyer to search for grounds to sue for federal government lands — grounds which our Attorney General's Office has concluded do not exist.

And House Speaker Scott Bedke is spearheading a drive to combine the efforts of seven western states in wresting lands from the feds.

I'm surprised ranchers aren't speaking out on this issue. In 2013, the federal rate was about \$1.35 per animal unit month; Idaho charged \$15.50.

I'd expect to hear more also from those who benefit directly from the \$6.3 billion in sales generated by outdoor recreation in Idaho. Bedke has bluntly stated that we will not be selling state lands.

The position of other Republicans, however, is less clear. While serving in the U.S. House, Butch Otter co-sponsored a bill to sell federal lands to pay for New Orleans hurricane relief.

Otter's position is close to that of the sample legislation from the corporate-financed American Legislative Exchange Council: be it further resolved that, to the extent that the Public Lands Commission determines through a public process that any such land should be sold to private owners, that ... 5 percent of the net proceeds shall be paid to the Permanent Fund for the public schools, and 95 percent of the net proceeds should be paid to the national government to pay down the national debt.

That's right, 95 percent of funds to the federal government. The concern here is not so much that the lands benefit the state, but that they are privatized.

The Cato Institute, another Koch brothers creation, calls for selling surface, water and mining rights separately. The surface rights could be sold to a coalition of private citizens planning to camp and fish there, while the water rights go to a coalition of ranchers, and the mining rights to a corporation.

The single poll I have seen says over 70 percent of Idahoans oppose the land transfer. Apparently that isn't deterring Republican political leaders. They are convinced two-thirds of Idahoans will continue to vote for them.