

Idaho Statesman

Forest trust promoter opposes giving the proceeds to the counties

Submitted by Rocky Barker on Thu, 06/28/2012 - 6:08pm

The idea of forest trusts for managing national forests is not new but it has gotten new life as a way to raise money for struggling rural counties, especially in Idaho and Oregon.

Idaho Republican Rep Raúl Labrador's Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act is the latest bill that picks up on the novel idea to set up a trust over an area of public land to show it can be managed better. I think it has a good chance of approval in the House Resources Committee and even to pass the House.

The bill won't be needed to keep the rural counties getting their federal money. A deal that moves the transportation bill includes reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act for now.

But the forest trust idea itself might get legs, at least as pilot project. Randal O'Toole, a libertarian policy analyst, came up with the idea in the 1980s as an alternative to the Forest Service management he had skewered intellectually in his 1988 book *Reforming the Forest Service*.

O'Toole, of Bandon, Ore., argued that the agency's timber sale program, which funded at the time many of its programs, gave managers an incentive to over-harvest forests, degrade water quality and build too many roads. His arguments brought many eastern and Midwest conservatives on board of environmental fights to reduce old growth timber harvests in the 1980s and 1990s.

These are the same reductions that counties say justify their call for federal dollars or a forest trust to generate revenue. The counties got 25 percent of Forest Service timber sale proceeds and even more from the Bureau of Land Management lands in Oregon.

O'Toole suggested a pilot project where a ranger district would be turned over to a trust board for management much like Labrador's bill would do. Environmental laws would be in force only as they would be for private forest land. But in setting up the trustees and the responsibilities, the various interests, fish, wildlife, local communities, recreation interests and others would be considered.

User fees would be central to the plan along with timber sales and other resource marketing. He would set up a fund to offset access fees for people who couldn't afford them.

He argued the trust board would protect the land better than the government.

Today O'Toole is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute. His latest book is "American Nightmare: How Government Undermines the Dream of Homeownership." He has become a leading voice against urban planning, smart growth and public transit

He's the darling of groups like the Idaho Freedom Foundation. He hates seeing his idea of forest trusts established simply to benefit rural counties.

"The truth is that taxpayers in these counties (of which I am one) have been getting a free ride for decades," O'Toole writes in a guest opinion aimed at Oregon newspapers.

"While federal lands impose little cost on counties, the payments out of timber receipts have been many times greater than the federal government would have paid if it had paid ordinary property taxes."

O'Toole's comments are aimed at a proposal by Democratic Rep. Peter DeFazio who has proposed to divide western Oregon BLM lands into two chunks. One portion, containing mostly old-growth timber, would be set aside for conservation. The other portion, mainly second-growth timber, would be managed as a source of revenues for the counties.

"While some environmental groups oppose this plan, I don't see anything wrong with managing cutover land for timber," O'Toole said. "But I have to wonder why Southwest Oregon counties should continue to live off of federal taxpayers, who would otherwise get any receipts from Forest Service and BLM sales."

The man who offers to the Republican Party forest trusts as a free market alternative to federal management of public lands doesn't think the counties deserve the proceeds. In Oregon, O'Toole said, raising property taxes to somewhere around the statewide average would solve the problems in all but two of the counties.

In Idaho five counties, Boundary, Clearwater, Idaho, Shoshone and Valley developed the forest trust proposal. Look at the overall property tax rates in 2011 and only Shoshone's rate is higher than the statewide average of 1.294 percent.

Idaho County's property tax rate was .668 percent. But it and many of these counties are among the poorest in the state with the highest unemployment. Their residents can afford the taxes the least.

O'Toole says if the counties can't or won't raise taxes then they should cut back on any spending that is what he calls a luxury, including recreation, cultural resources and community development.

Questioning the counties justification for the money is not good politics anywhere in the Pacific Northwest. But O'Toole doesn't need anyone's vote.