

Public Lands Testimony

By Bill Sedivy, Idaho Rivers United

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Chairmen Winder and Denney, and members of the Interim Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to offer a few thoughts on behalf of the members of Idaho Rivers United regarding legislative proposals to transfer ownership of certain federal lands to the State of Idaho.

Idaho Rivers United (IRU) is a statewide, non-profit river conservation organization headquartered in Boise. We have 3,500 members, about 70 percent of whom live in our State. Our members are people who utilize Idaho's vast tracts of public lands — they are whitewater boaters, fishermen, hunters, campers — and they are people who appreciate the ecological, cultural, spiritual and economic benefits that our rivers provide. IRU's mission is to protect and restore the rivers of Idaho. All Idahoans benefit from clean, healthy rivers.

Questions of legality aside, the people of Idaho Rivers United would oppose the transfer of federal lands to the State of Idaho as outlined in HCR 22 for many reasons:

1. We believe the proposal as articulated could well lead to the sale of vast tracts of public lands to private interests. That might be the only way the state could afford ownership. Such sales would be bad for Idahoans — impacting our public lands heritage by restricting access to boating, fishing, hunting, camping and other outdoor pursuits.
2. We do not believe that Idaho possesses the financial resources needed to appropriately care for and manage lands that might remain in State hands — but I'm sure that you'll do a full and thorough economic analysis before making your recommendation.

3. Rivers flowing through public lands contain much of our nation's best habitat for imperiled stocks of salmon and steelhead, and bull trout. We worry that Idaho's agencies don't have the capacity, or the political support, to match federal protection efforts now in place. While current federal efforts are inadequate, more work is needed for wild salmon and steelhead restoration — not less.
4. We believe that river recreation on federal lands is managed well and fairly efficiently by the agencies. We do not support a change in ownership or management for recreational reasons.
5. HCR 22 is silent on the management of federally protected Wild & Scenic Rivers and National Recreation Areas. That is an issue this committee should examine further and should consider if it chooses to move forward. Silence on those types of protections would force us to assume that the state would attempt to void them if transfers of federal lands becomes reality. Such a rollback would be unacceptable to our membership.
6. Public land recreation plays an important role in Idaho's economy. River recreation is an important component of our recreation and tourism industry. We believe the loss of federal lands and protected rivers — especially if accompanied reduced stewardship and ineffective or reduced management — could result in significant declines in our state's tourism economy. I re-iterate this point – made this morning by Mr. Simonds – because many of our members work in businesses that rely on public lands, or work in communities that benefit mightily from river recreation.
7. Finally, Idahoans have proven – under the leadership of Senator Mike Crapo and others – that they can come together collaboratively to resolve differences over the management of federal lands. The Owyhee Initiative, and the ongoing work of the Clearwater Collaborative are two examples. We don't need a change in ownership to make progress.

In summary, Idaho's public lands and the wild rivers that flow through them are vital cogs in Idaho's natural and cultural heritage. Our vast tracts of public lands and thousands of miles of free-flowing rivers make Idaho truly unique and special among states. Our public lands — our mountains, rivers, lakes, and deserts — are among our nation's most precious assets.

With all due respect to this committee's assignment, the notion of transferring ownership — and the possibility of selling some parcels off to the highest bidder — is a bad idea, regardless of whether it's legal or not.

When your work is finished, I hope that you'll report to the full House and Senate that transferring title of certain federal lands to the State is not necessary, that we probably can't afford it, and that it will be unpopular here in Idaho and around the nation.

Again, thank you for your time.