

WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE GOVERNOR'S TASK FORCE REVIEWING THE POSSIBLE
CONVERSION OF FEDERAL PUBLIC LANDS IN IDAHO TO THE STATE
December 4, 2013

Deliberations regarding the possible conversion of Federal public lands to Idaho's Department of Lands should factor in the economic value of Idaho's wildlife found largely on Federal public lands. This involves both Idaho residents and non-resident recreationists. Since 1991 through 2011 (at five-year intervals) the U. s. Fish & Wildlife Service has conducted national surveys of fishing, hunting and wildlife watching and photography. The economic implications of the most recent survey (2011) addressing Idaho are cited herein.

There was a total of 447,000 anglers that fished 5,507,000 days in Idaho expending \$422,120,000 averaging \$47 per day. Non-residents comprised 208,000 of the 447,000.

There were 246,000 hunters, involving 3,227,000 days of hunting, spending a total of \$477,548,000 averaging \$88 per day. Non-resident hunters totaled 85,000 from the total 246,000 hunters.

Total wildlife watching participants (away from home at least one mile) involved 281,000 people. Trip related expenditures were \$82,479,000 and averaged trip expenditure per day was \$22. Non-residents totaled 96,000 out of the 281,000.

The majority of the hunting, fishing and wildlife watching/photography is on the 20.4 million acres of National Forest lands and 12 million acres of Federal land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

And it should be noted the U. S. Forest Service (USFS) budget in Idaho in 2011 was \$158,000,000 and the cost of fire-fighting was \$175,000,000.

The BLM's 2012 budget in Idaho was \$117,000,000 and another \$22,000,000 was spent on fire suppression. The agency budgets are paid for by the taxpayers of the 50 States. Non-residents do have an equity here. By comparison the Department of Lands manages 2.4 million acres of State Endowment Trust Lands, which includes 1.5 million acres of range lands that are in the southern two-thirds of the State. The Department also manages 300,000 acres of timberlands. It has eight sources of funding. It has an operating budget (2013) of just over \$46,000,000 with taxes accounting for \$4,258,000, and the endowment administrative fund contributing most of the budget--\$26,101,400. How could the State of Idaho possibly generate adequate funding to manage the Federal public lands at the current level of management, plus the accelerated cost of fire control under current drought conditions?

The Chief of the USFS, in a recent visit to Boise, indicated climate change affecting the public land Eco-systems portend increased potential for large fires throughout the West in future years. One wonders: How can Idaho, with limited financial capability and fire-fighting capability, hope to contend with such formidable challenges if it were to take over the management of 32.4 million acres of Federal public lands?

Let me comment on the current condition of very important wildlife resources associated with two Game Management Units 32 and 32A in the Payette and Weiser watersheds. This is a major winter range for big game. This involves the Little Willow Creek drainage, the Big Willow

Creek drainage and the Squaw Creek drainage in the Payette watershed and the Crane Creek drainage and Lower Little Weiser drainage in the Weiser River watershed. These two Game Management Units involve a major winter range approximately 30 miles long and 12 miles wide. And it should be noted this region is a very valuable wintering habitat for big game (deer, elk, antelope), wild horses, and year-around upland bird habitat. The big game animals summer on West Mountain ridge, Council Mountain, Indian Mountain, the Upper Little Salmon River, and the Upper Little Fork of the Weiser.

The winter range in the Little Willow and Big Willow drainages has an excellent life support system for big game with elevation ranging from 3500' to 5000'. In addition, a very important condition is aspect (south and west facing slopes) to accelerate snow melt. And, of course, size (adequate space), security (associated with topographic relief and cover), and last but not least food. That includes bitterbrush, aspen thickets and sagebrush with a mix of blue bunch wheat grass, Idaho fescue, and thread grass and forbs.

The welfare of the game bird populations, such as forest grouse, sage grouse, chukar and gray partridge is inextricably associated with the under story growth (grasses and forbs). This under story is essential for nest security, and vital to chick survival due to the production of insects. The under story, under current management, impaired by drought, is extensively overgrazed by domestic livestock this fall. This will negatively affect next year's upland bird populations which rely on last years carry-over under story for nesting cover. And domestic livestock left on the winter range too long following the desiccation of under story plants is in direct competition with wild ungulates for the year's annual growth of bitter brush.

The upshot of this discussion is how would the integrity of this winter range and many others across southern Idaho be maintained if the State should take over the Federal public lands and "to professionally and prudently manage Idaho's endowment assets to maximize long-term financial returns to public schools and other trust beneficiaries." Translated that means increased grazing by domestic livestock and accelerating timber harvest beyond levels currently managed by the adequately funded Federal agencies.

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