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OPINION

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Success in land management is rooted in a clear mission

By State Forester David Groeschl

Ask Idahoans if they value healthy forests and you'll likely get an affirmative response.

Ask them how to manage for healthy forests and you'll likely get a wide range of opinions.

Therein lays the challenge for the U.S. Forest Service and other federal land managers. A tangled web of federal laws and policies designed to guide the management of most federally managed forestlands in Idaho often leaves professional land managers in the unenviable position of trying to be all things to all people on all acres.

The result is gridlock.

Governor Otter recently traveled to Washington, D.C., to urge a House subcommittee to support setting aside a specific national forest in Idaho for a pilot project under a trust management model as a way to address the gridlock.

As State Forester, I oversee management of 1 million forested acres of the total 2.4 million acres of state endowment trust lands in Idaho. The Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) and the Land Board manage these lands under a trust model mandate grounded in Idaho's constitution. Our mission is clear: to "maximize long-term financial returns" to public schools and other constitutionally designated public institutions.

Meeting our mission requires ongoing stewardship of endowment trust lands. Tree planting following a harvest and leaving in place seed trees for natural regeneration are examples of that long-term stewardship. Stewardship also means we follow all state and federal environmental laws aimed at protecting water, air quality, and habitat. In fact, recent water quality audits show harvest activities on state lands have a 99 percent rate of compliance with standards set forth in the Idaho Forest Practices Act and accompanying administrative rules.

Legal roadblocks to achieving our land management objectives are limited because the law dictates for us one type of dominant use paradigm – active management to produce revenues for schools.

The benefits of a trust management model in reducing fire-prone fuels, enhancing economic activity and creating jobs, and improving forest health undoubtedly are the Governor's driving motives in urging this approach. It is the dominant use concept that makes the trust model so effective in achieving well-defined land management objectives.

Even wilderness areas are managed under a dominant use model, as are national recreation areas, national parks, and roadless areas, lessening the likelihood of litigation when the Forest Service makes a decision in keeping with the prescribed management of those lands.

But roughly 7 million acres managed by the Forest Service in Idaho have no defined dominant use to drive effective management.

On these 7 million acres, most actions the Forest Service deems necessary to improve the health of the land – for instance, using timber harvest as a management tool to remove vegetation to promote growth of desired tree species – need to comply with onerous procedural requirements and are met with reams of paperwork to withstand an appeal. Former Chief of the Forest Service Dale Bosworth termed it, “analysis paralysis.”

Additionally, a [recent study](#) of the U.S. Government Accountability Office showed that Region 1 of the Forest Service, which includes northern Idaho, lead with the most appeals and lawsuits on federal projects involving fuel reduction activities than any other region of the Forest Service during Fiscal Years 2006 through 2008. Region 1 is facing 10 timber sales with active lawsuits and was even blocked on a collaborative stewardship project because of perceived threats to lynx habitat, according to [one article](#) following an interview with the Region 1 Forester.

As past Forest Service Chiefs have pointed out, including Jack Ward Thomas, without a clear mission or mandate from Congress, the Forest Service is left longing for how to define and measure success.

We may not all agree on how to manage public lands, but at least the establishment of a dominant use model in addition to wilderness and roadless areas for some of our federally forested lands in Idaho, as Governor Otter suggested, would create realistic expectations and a clear mission for Forest Service land managers to achieve the economic, ecological, and social benefits we all seek.

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David Groeschl has been the Idaho State Forester since 2011. He has 27 years of experience in forestry and land management.

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