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GOVERNOR

OPINION

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GOOD NEIGHBOR AUTHORITY IMPROVES THE LIVES OF CITIZENS AND THE HEALTH OF OUR LANDS

By the State Board of Land Commissioners

Picture the size of Idaho's largest city; then multiply it more than 160 times.

The U.S. Forest Service has identified an area that large – approximately 8.84 million acres of national forests spread across Idaho – that is at high risk of mortality from insect and disease infestation and wildfire.

That sobering picture is part of the reason diverse interests including the timber industry, conservation interests, and multiple levels of government are getting behind a process for increasing the pace and scale of forest and watershed restoration work on federal lands in Idaho.

Good Neighbor Authority is a federal law that enables the State of Idaho and the Forest Service to work together on federal land management projects that involve removing dead trees and other fuels, conducting prescribed burns, planting new trees, and carrying out other on-the-ground activities that reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfires.

As members of the State Board of Land Commissioners, we wholeheartedly support Good Neighbor Authority because it is improving the health of Idaho's national forests, strengthening the economies of local timber communities and supporting Idaho's forest products industry. Good Neighbor Authority is a great tool for chipping away at the enormous amount of work needed to ensure our public lands keep providing benefits for generations to come.

The Forest Service spends less taxpayer money by using streamlined State of Idaho contracting processes to carry out its federal forest plans. Additional Idaho Department of Lands foresters and staff help implement the projects, which are vetted through federal environmental review processes and are supported by local collaborative groups. The Forest Service maintains oversight and decision-making authority, but the federal agency has been a great partner in efficiently administering this program.

Another advantage of Good Neighbor Authority: it eventually will pay for itself.

Industry contributions combined with funds from the federal government and the State provided the seed money to get Good Neighbor Authority started in Idaho, but income from the projects themselves is expected to be funding the program within five years.

Good Neighbor Authority agreements are in place with four national forests and include 11 projects on federal lands across Idaho. Timber harvesting already has started on two of the projects. The projects will produce enough timber to support 1,300 direct forest industry jobs and 300 indirect jobs, provide \$68.5 million in additional wages, and contribute \$118 million to Idaho's economy.

Federal agencies are eager to line up more Good Neighbor Authority projects with help from the State. In the coming weeks, the Idaho Legislature will consider a budget request from the Department of Lands to expand our ability to use Good Neighbor Authority in Idaho. If approved, we will add to the number of projects already in progress and expand our work to include rangelands managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Idaho is demonstrating that we prefer action to waiting for further legislative fixes to the tangle of laws and budget challenges that inhibit federal land management agencies.

Good Neighbor Authority is gaining momentum in Idaho because it is working. We hope the rest of the West follows Idaho's lead by focusing efforts on how we can work together to improve the lives of our citizens and the health of our lands right now.

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The State Board of Land Commissioners (Land Board) is comprised of Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter (Chairman), Secretary of State Lawrence Denney, Attorney General Lawrence Wasden, Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra, and State Controller Brandon Woolf.