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OPINION

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IDAHO IS FIGHTING WILDFIRES THROUGH THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter

Diverse interests are working together in unprecedented ways in Idaho to improve the health and resiliency of our lands.

Our goal, in part, is to reduce large wildfires that cost taxpayers millions of dollars to suppress, damage wildlife habitat, pump millions of tons of carbon into the air, pile sediment into our waterways, hurt our economy, and harm the health of our citizens.

The Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) auctioned a federal lands timber sale for the first time in Idaho during the past week. It was a milestone for the State of Idaho in working with the U.S. Forest Service, timber companies and other forest partners on an "all lands" approach to restoring forested lands in Idaho and providing additional wood to sustain Idaho's forest products industry – our mill operators, loggers, and truckers.

The Wapiti Timber Sale on the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests is the first of several forest restoration projects planned in Idaho using Good Neighbor Authority, a federal law extended to all states under the 2014 Farm Bill that enables the Forest Service to work with states to achieve landscape objectives across ownership boundaries.

Other projects are planned for the Payette National Forest in west-central Idaho and the Idaho Panhandle National Forests in northern Idaho.

Before Good Neighbor Authority, Idaho could not legally help the Forest Service with the enormous and complex job of restoring our national forests.

Federal, State and private lands are intermingled in Idaho, so management practices on federal lands inevitably affect neighboring State and private lands. Idahoans wasted no time before taking advantage of the opportunities presented by Good Neighbor Authority.

IDL forestry professionals are skilled and efficient in managing nearly 1 million acres of state endowment forests for long-term health and sustainability. Selling timber from endowment forests helps fund Idaho's public schools and other State institutions.

We are lending IDL expertise in preparing and administering timber sales, conducting field layout for timber sales, and collecting data to augment Forest Service efforts. The State of Idaho, the timber industry, and the federal government all have pitched in and provided commitments of time and money to increase the pace and scale of forest and watershed restoration projects happening on federal lands in Idaho.

Wildfire is influenced by three factors: weather, terrain and fuels. Only fuels can be managed.

While some firefights dominate headlines for months, few people know that State and federal fire managers suppress hundreds of additional wildfires every summer in Idaho before they get bigger than a few acres. Many of those fires are stopped because proactive management robbed them of fuels along their path.

While Good Neighbor Authority is a godsend, it is not the only way in which State and federal authorities are working together to restore the health of federal lands in Idaho.

Idaho ranchers have been working with the Bureau of Land Management and IDL since 2012 to set up rangeland fire protection associations to assist with quick initial attack of fires. That has resulted in nearly 8 million acres across southern Idaho that now receive primary or secondary fire protection from the people who live and work on the land. Idahoans' work with federal agencies to create fire breaks to prevent habitat loss for sage-grouse is yet another example.

There is no Washington, D.C. mandate behind the cooperation happening in Idaho. Partnership is happening here because Idahoans are results-driven people – including those in positions of leadership within State and federal agencies in Idaho.

Like me, Idahoans can be proud of the terrific progress happening in our state because of our desire to roll up our sleeves and put planning into action for the improvement of our environment and the benefit of our people.

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