



OPINION

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Potential state-federal-private land deal could benefit Idaho

By Idaho Department of Lands Acting Director and State Forester David Groeschl

A land exchange idea in Idaho and Clearwater counties has the potential to protect lands with special historical and ecological value, transfer more forestland to the State of Idaho to help fund Idaho's public schools, and open up more lands for recreation.

The Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) and other parties are reaching out to various stakeholder groups right now to gauge support for the Central Idaho Land Exchange.

Under the concept, Western Pacific Timber would deed approximately 38,000 acres of its land in the Upper Lochsa Basin to the U.S. Forest Service. Many interests in the area – including sportsmen groups, the conservation community, Nez Perce Tribe, and others – have long sought to bring these private lands into Forest Service ownership because they hold historical value tied to the Lewis and Clark expedition and because of their important fish and wildlife habitat. The once-private lands would be accessible to the public for recreation.

Western Pacific Timber is actively pursuing the sale of its lands. Without the option of transferring its land to the Forest Service, Western Pacific Timber may divide its land and sell it off in pieces to multiple private landowners.

When the private lands transfer to federal ownership, the Forest Service would deed selected federal lands to the State of Idaho (IDL). The value of the lands IDL receives from the Forest Service would equal the value of the lands the Forest Service receives from Western Pacific Timber. The transaction is subject to a federally required Final Environmental Impact Statement, which must go through a public review period. The federal lands acquired by IDL would be managed for sustainable timber harvest, and the revenue from timber sales would financially support Idaho's public schools. Economic activity on the lands would support jobs in the local communities, and the lands would remain open for recreation. Additionally, Idaho law does not allow the State to sell endowment timberland.

As the lands switch ownership, Western Pacific Timber would receive cash that IDL deposited into an escrow account. The cash amount would equal the value of the lands the company deeds to the Forest Service. Western Pacific Timber would receive no lands.

All the steps would happen simultaneously.

Additionally, Western Pacific Timber has agreed to consider donating to Idaho County a certain number of years' worth of property taxes to soften the blow of a reduction to the tax base when the private lands transfer to Forest Service ownership.

The Central Idaho Land Exchange concept is fundamentally different from the failed Lochsa Land Exchange proposal that was not supported by local citizens several years ago. Western Pacific Timber would have remained a large landowner in the area under the Lochsa Land Exchange. Under the Central Idaho Land Exchange concept, Western Pacific Timber no longer would own land in the area.

The biggest difference between the old Lochsa Land Exchange proposal and the new Central Idaho Land Exchange concept is the introduction of the State of Idaho as a player in the transaction. The State Board of Land Commissioners (Land Board) directed IDL to explore potential acquisitions of Idaho timberland using proceeds from the sale of endowment lands elsewhere in Idaho. We have a unique opportunity right now to reinvest a large amount of endowment land sale proceeds back into Idaho lands to produce ongoing revenue for public schools and other beneficiaries for generations to come.

The IDL set up a web page this week where the public can learn more about the Central Idaho Land Exchange concept and view maps of the acres being considered for exchange. You can view the web page at this link: <https://www.idl.idaho.gov/real-estate/central-id/index.html>

Our next steps will depend on the feedback we receive from stakeholder groups and the ability of the IDL to meet our fiduciary obligation to public schools and other beneficiaries through this unique land exchange concept.

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