



OPINION

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Partnership helping to keep Idaho endowment lands open for recreation

By Idaho Department of Lands Director Dustin Miller

This time of year, many Idahoans take to Idaho's forests, rangelands and waterways to participate in annual fall hunting, fishing and other activities. These traditions are woven into the fabric of our culture in Idaho and help define us as Idahoans.

Idaho provides exceptional hunting and fishing opportunities, and is one of the most sought-after states for an incredible outdoor experience. And what makes Idaho such a great place to pursue these activities is access to public lands, as well as state endowment lands.

The Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) manages nearly 2.5 million acres of endowment forest and rangelands at the direction of the State Board of Land Commissioners. These lands are different than federal public lands and are owned by the endowment beneficiaries, which are primarily Idaho public schools.

Article IX, Section 8 of the Idaho Constitution mandates that these lands be managed in a way that secures maximum long-term financial returns to the beneficiaries. In fact, because of this mandate, the Land Board recently approved a 4.5 percent increase in endowment distributions. This sets a record-breaking distribution of more than \$84 million for fiscal year 2021.

The Land Board supports a policy of allowing general public recreational use of legally accessible endowment land for activities like hunting. But only if those activities do not degrade the lands, interfere with management activities, or otherwise negatively affect the long-term financial return to beneficiaries.

A year-old agreement between IDL and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) has successfully helped ensure that access. Under this agreement, IDFG compensates IDL 25 cents per endowment acre annually for public hunting, fishing, and other recreational land uses. This helps cover costs associated with recreation management on endowment lands. The money comes from revenue generated from hunting, fishing, and trapping licenses, as well as Pittman-Robertson funds, which are an excise tax on firearms and ammunition.

The agreement satisfies the Land Board's responsibility to provide a financial return to the beneficiaries for land use. And IDFG is providing conservation officer services to assist with recreation enforcement to help ensure that recreational activities do not degrade endowment land.

In addition, IDL is inventorying trails on endowment land and determining how to provide a quality trail experience that is compatible with the endowment mission. Designated trails will soon be mapped and signed. Undesignated trails that cause resource damage will be closed and reclaimed.

But please be aware, even with the agreement, there are a few endowment areas not open to the public due to safety reasons or a lack of legal access.

Access to endowment land in Idaho is important to us as Idahoans, and so long as revenue-generating activities are respected and not impacted, these lands will remain open for public access and recreation. As the director of the Idaho Department of Lands, I am asking you to do your part to protect endowment land while enjoying them. Working together, we can continue to enjoy hunting and other activities, while also supporting our school children by being good stewards of these lands.

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