

Best way to manage public land?

By Keith Ridler
Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — An armed group occupying the headquarters of a national wildlife refuge in Oregon wants the federal government to relinquish about 300 square miles to local control so it can be opened up for ranching, mining, logging and other uses.

Birders covet the same land for its many migrating species that use refuge marshland as a key resting place. Anglers, hunters and wildlife watchers also are drawn to the high desert terrain.

The competition between the different interests is emblematic of a much larger struggle in the West, playing out in federal courts, state legislatures and Congress.

At its core, the dispute comes down to personal values: Recreationists' and environmentalists' views on open spaces clash with traditional uses that have sustained rural communities for generations.

What's at stake:

About a million square miles of public land managed by the federal government, mostly in the West, according to the Congressional Research Service.

What do business interests say?

Many of those who depend on the land for their livelihood argue that wildlife holds more weight than people. They sometimes frame their outlook in patriotic or religious terms and say federal land managers who impose limits are shutting down lumber mills, cutting off cattle grazing, preventing mining and destroying a way of life in the rural West.

They say that could be solved by turning public lands over to locals who would be better caretakers

than far-off bureaucrats.

They do have some protections, including an 1872 mining law that still offers miners low-cost access to federal land.

What do environmentalists say?

Many environmental groups say mining, logging and ranching have run roughshod for decades on public land and left a legacy of pollution for taxpayers to clean up. They say the industries have wiped out old-growth forests and overgrazed landscapes made vulnerable to invasive species.

Conservationists accuse federal officials of allowing the practices that have scarred the West and failing to enforce laws. The most widely recognized is the Endangered Species Act, famously used to limit logging in the Pacific Northwest to protect forests that are home to spotted owls and marbled murrelets.

What do outdoor enthusiasts say?

The open spaces of the West have miles of streams to fish, trails to hike, mountains to climb and areas to traverse on snowmobiles. Among recreationists' biggest fears is being shut out.

In northern Idaho, residents so far have torpedoed a proposed land swap between a timber company and the U.S. Forest Service over concerns about losing access to part of a national forest.

What does the government say?

U.S. agencies manage most of the public land and try to balance the different interests, but they frequently become lightning rods, with their decisions challenged in court.

Employees of the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and

National Park Service tend to have an affinity for open spaces and a belief in public service, said John Freemuth, a Boise State University professor and public lands expert.

Who's the heavyweight?

Congress. U.S. lawmakers could turn over federal lands to local control, but state efforts so far have failed.

A strategy has emerged in recent years in which members of Congress slip land-use amendments into critical budget bills. For example, U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, and U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Montana, attached a so-called rider in 2011 that stripped federal protections for gray wolves in their states.

As a result, environmental groups have become increasingly watchful. But their push to weaken the 1872 mining law has failed, as have industry efforts to weaken the Endangered Species Act.

Is compromise possible?

Yes. After more than a decade of effort, Simpson this summer shepherded through Congress a compromise bill that created a 430-square-mile federal wilderness in some of central Idaho's most pristine country. It limits development in some areas but opens it up in others.

It got help passing after President Barack Obama signaled that the area would be designated a national monument if the bill stalled.

In another compromise, federal land critics and ranchers supported an order by Interior Secretary Sally Jewell last year that aimed to stop wildfires.

Republican Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, a critic of federal land policy, has praised the order. So have ranchers, who partnered with federal firefighters in a plan to respond quickly to blazes.

Happy days for snowmen...



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