

Idaho rallygoers hope public lands stay in public hands

NICOLE BLANCHARD Idaho Statesman March 4, 2017



Sean Jones wasn't planning on bringing his elk bugle call to the public lands rally at the Idaho statehouse on Saturday. But its trumpeting sound rang out across Jefferson Street and the south steps of the capitol building in harmony with the raucous applause and cheers of the more than 2,000 Idahoans gathered in the chilly morning drizzle.

Jones, like so many other outdoor lovers, was at the rally because he's an avid hunter, rafter and hiker. Like he does on most outdoor adventures, he brought his gear bag, an elk antler strapped to the bungee cord on the back of the pack and the triumphant-sounding elk call conveniently at hand.

"I want to have access," said Jones, echoing a theme that dominated the rally. "I've seen far too many 'no trespassing' signs when I'm out hunting."

Jones said he has emailed and called Idaho legislators to let them know he opposes the potential transfer of public lands to the state or private hands. He wasn't impressed with their responses.

“Particularly Raul Labrador,” said Jones. (Rep. Labrador has led pushes for pilot programs that would give states control over federal lands.)

How did the lawmakers respond?

“The typical argument that lands are mismanaged,” said Jones. “But we know the forest managers, the BLM, the people making decisions (about Idaho lands) actually live here.”

Some attendees said they felt the current political climate led to the massive turnout, one of the largest in the West on the issue. (Though, speaker Yvette Tuell, a member of the Shoshone-Bannock tribe pointed out, it’s not a new fight.) Some attendees carried signs that alluded to the Trump administration — one warning the government to “keep your (tiny) hands off my public lands,” and others calling out members of President Donald Trump’s cabinet, like newly confirmed Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke and head of the EPA Scott Pruitt.

Though Zinke, a former Montana congressman, has said he opposes the transfer of federal lands, some at the rally said they take little comfort in the politician’s words.

“I don’t trust anybody in office right now,” said Carolyn Blackhurst, who was at the gathering with her husband, an avid angler.

Closer to home, Utah Republican Rep. Jason Chaffetz drew the ire of outdoorsmen when he introduced a bill asking the Interior Secretary to sell or dispose of more than 3.3 million acres of public land, legislation that Boise hunter Kevin Braley called “disturbing.” After public outcry, Chaffetz withdrew the proposal.

“I think politicians don’t fully understand the groundswell of opposition (to transferring public lands),” said Braley, who attended a similar rally at the statehouse several years ago. At that time, Braley said, the gathering was mostly made up of hunters.

Hunters, anglers, hikers, rafters and more are not optimistic about what would happen to their ability to recreate if Idaho had control of lands, either. They say it’s not worth the risk to hope the state keeps their interests in mind.

Many protesters said the state simply doesn't have the money to maintain Idaho's land — 62 percent of the state is federally owned. One major wildfire or lawsuit, protesters said, and the most attractive option to Idaho could be to sell off their beloved lands.

"We have this stuff right now. It's a tangible thing," said Ryan Callaghan, a spokesman for Idaho hunting gear brand First Light who spoke at the event. "So why would you want to gamble all that?"

John Thompson, a member of the Idaho Farm Bureau, doesn't see it that way. He drove across the state Saturday to pose a counterpoint to the rally. Idaho's massive wildfires, beetle infestations and rural depopulation are results of poor land management by the federal government, Thompson said.

According to Thompson, selling public lands to the state wouldn't limit access. Despite Idaho's track record for selling off its state-owned lands*, Thompson said, the state also acquires land on a fairly regular basis. Rather than focusing on recreation, Thompson said he wishes protesters would look at the issue from the standpoint of rural economies.

"We don't want Idaho to just be a place for rich people to recreate," said Thompson, who argues that Idaho's far-flung settlements would benefit more from flourishing industries boosted by state control than from sportsmen looking to gain access to public lands.

For both sides of the argument, many of the concerns are the same. And each is convinced that its solutions will work. Greg Blascovich, of nonprofit Keep It Public, took issue with Thompson's assertions that, economically speaking, Idaho is the best landlord for rural lands.

"Right now it's cheaper to graze cattle on federal land. There are assumptions being made that the state would sell its land to current grazers," Blascovich said. "That's not true. (Transferring land) will kill ranching."

He said federal management of lands has not been perfect, but to propose changing hands over a few discrepancies "is the definition of throwing the baby out with the bathwater." Instead, Blascovich said, there needs to be a mixed model to managing

these lands and increased communication that makes sure all stakeholders have a voice.

Further, Martin Hackworth, executive director of Sharetrails, said rural communities like Challis have had success harnessing the popularity of recreation to boost their economies. After all, said Hackworth, there are only so many people in those areas who can ranch or work in industries like mining.

"You can't eat the scenery," Hackworth said. "Studies all show recreation is the single best shot in the arm for rural economies."

Thompson, who was accompanied by a handful of other pro-transfer companions at the rally, said he's not under any illusions about being in the minority.

"Our voice is miniscule in comparison to the millions and millions of people who won't get behind state-owned lands," said Thompson, encouraging people to be skeptical of the messages coming from environmental groups.

Despite the underlying political tension of the rally, many protesters said support for federally owned land is something that goes across the board in Idaho — a state with more public lands than most others.

"I'm the guy they invited so they could say, 'See, even this guy agrees with us,'" said Hackworth during his speech. His group represents motor vehicle recreationists, a group that is sometimes at odds with other sportsmen over trail access.

"Republican, Democrat, this is the one place that we all meet," said Blackhurst, who honeymooned in the Sawtooths with her husband 20 years ago and hopes her grandchildren can one day visit the same public spots.

That it's such a cohesive movement could explain why the Saturday gathering drew such a crowd. (Organizers estimated the turnout at closer to 2,600 people.)

As rally winded down, a band on the steps of the capitol played "This Land Is Your Land" — a song with a storied political history. Time will tell, it seems, if this land was made for you and me.

