

 print this page

Land transfers draw more ire

Seattle group says CIEDRA land gifts should be 'roundly rejected'

by *GREG STAHL*

When someone refers to proposed land giveaways in Congressman Mike Simpson's recently released Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act as "land trades," Janine Blaeloch is quick to correct them.

"These are land gifts, land giveaways, land donations, but they are not land trades," the Seattle-based public land watchdog said.

As director of the recently renamed Western Lands Project, Blaeloch keeps an eye on federal land transactions on behalf of the American people who own them.

She is alarmed by Simpson's proposal to give ownership of 2,000 to 3,000 acres of federal land to Custer and Blaine counties, as well as to the cities of Stanley, Challis and Mackay. In addition to the land gifts, Simpson's far-reaching bill would designate 300,011 acres of the Boulder and White Cloud mountains as wilderness.

For hard-line conservationists, the land gifts are a real sticking point.

"As long as environmental groups go along with this quid pro quo, it's going to be very difficult for us to get pure wilderness again," Blaeloch said. "The wilderness aspect can really grease the skids for a lot of development.

"It's a chilling idea. I do think that it will move along much farther the idea that federal land can be cashed out to help local interests."

But at a meeting of the environmental minds at Redfish Lake a week ago, Idaho Conservation League Executive Director Rick Johnson pointed out that Simpson's bill is as close as wilderness supporters have come to protections for the Boulder and White Cloud mountains in 20 years.

"It's not a non-starter," he said. "We are, for the first time since Frank Church was a senator, going to have a serious discussion on wilderness in this state."

Idahoans are also going to have a serious discussion about giving away publicly owned land.

Blaeloch said she does not like to use the word "precedent." She also said, however, that the bill establishes a paradigm whereby rural economic problems can be ameliorated by the disposal of federal land.

"If this idea takes hold, we are in a heap of trouble with federal lands," she said. "What you're going to have is every county commissioner in the West lining up for their deal for the disposal of federal lands to boost their economy."

Simpson's bill does not fully explain many of the land gifts it proposes, but Simpson's chief of staff, Lindsay Slater, said the land gifts would range between 2,000 and 3,000 acres. The bill specifically refers to 76 acres of

the Sawtooth National Recreation Area in and around Stanley that would be given to Stanley, as well as 86 acres on a bench above Stanley that would be given to Custer County.

The Stanley-area land gifts have been a bone of contention for a coalition of Sawtooth Valley residents who have said the land in question is valuable wildlife habitat and provides valuable scenic corridors.

But Blaeloch is looking at a bigger picture.

"In this case, if you didn't have the wilderness, you would have the naked giveaway of federal land," she said. "I can't imagine that Americans will be happy to know the SNRA is being disassembled for this bill."

She and others have pointed out that \$55 million has been spent on conservation easements in the SNRA to protect the area's scenic and pastoral attributes.

Blaeloch said Simpson's bill is unique for several reasons. Recent wilderness bills have triggered land trades and land sales, not land gifts, she said.

"Unlike (other recent bills), proponents have not even attempted to claim that the public at large will gain anything from the land transfers," she wrote. "The conveyance of land out of the well-loved, long-established Sawtooth National Recreation Area is particularly disturbing, suggesting that public lands that are assumed to be inviolate and permanently protected may be vulnerable to disposal."

[Copyright © 2005 Express Publishing Inc.](#)

All Rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part in any form or medium without express written permission of Express Publishing Inc. is prohibited.

The Idaho Mountain Express is distributed free to residents and guests throughout the Sun Valley, Idaho resort area community. [Subscribers](#) to the Idaho Mountain Express will read these stories and others in this week's issue.