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Star-News

Conservation group launches survey on Payette land swap

The Idaho Department of Lands and U.S. Forest Service could trade ownership of thousands of acres of land around Payette Lake, and McCall nonprofit United Payette wants the public to be involved.

The group will send out surveys to over 6,000 addresses across Valley County seeking public opinion on the prospect of future endowment lands management.

No details of a potential land swap have been publicly announced by IDL or the Forest Service, but public records requests to the state agency confirmed that negotiations have been made towards developing a proposal.

Records showed the Forest Service could swap about 21,500 acres for about 5,300 acres of IDL land, roughly 2,200 of which is currently endowment land around Payette Lake.

“There is no formal proposal at this time, but we understand that IDL and the Forest Service are still interested in the possibility,” said United Payette steering team member and Idaho Conservation League representative Randy Fox.

“We thought that doing the survey now was actually the best time, before there’s a formal proposal to help inform decision makers about the public sentiment and whether potential exchange is actually in the best public interest,” Fox said.

The survey will be open until the end of July, or as long as it takes to gather at least 400 responses so that the results are representative of local opinions, he said.

Each invitation comes with a unique pin number, in an effort to ensure each participant only completes one survey.

An “extreme amount of effort” went into making sure the survey would not be biased, Fox said.

United Payette paid for the development and analysis of the survey and partnered with the University of Idaho’s College of Natural Resources to design it.

“We wanted to remove any potential sense of having influenced the survey in one way or another” and create a “statistically valid product,” Fox said.

“We want it to be seen as trustworthy and not skewed to United Payette’s position...but focused on what the community believes and what are their values that they get from the endowment lands,” he said.

Results will be shared with local, state, and federal decisionmakers, as well as the public, to help inform future management decisions and direction, Fox said.

“If the public is behind it, that might give more support for it. If they’re clearly not, then that also tells us where United Payette might need to do more advocacy in our mission to conserve endowment lands,” he said.

In March 2021 the State Board of Land Commissioners approved the Payette Endowment Land Strategy, a 20-year plan for dividing and selling about 5,500 acres of state land surrounding Payette Lake and Little Payette Lake.

United Payette was founded in response to that plan, with the goal of preserving public access to the endowment lands by fulfilling IDL’s constitutional mandate to derive as much profit from the properties as possible.

United Payette has worked with IDL to preserve access in ways that align with the agency’s goals by funding a recreational lease on 1,200 acres of IDL land around the lake. The group pays \$20,000 per year for the lease.

The group’s plan to work with IDL to conserve lands around the lake includes purchasing property or conservation easements and facilitating land swaps.

United Payette’s membership includes a consortium of 22 nonprofits, intergovernmental agencies, businesses and associations that represent over 60,000 people.

Land swap details

A public records request to IDL revealed details of a negotiation in progress but no final proposal.

“It is too early to discuss any specifics regarding a possible land exchange with the Forest Service,” said IDL Public Information Officer Sharla Arledge.

The IDL Payette Lake property that could be swapped with the Forest Service included the 935-acre “Parcel H” to the east of Eastside Drive from McCall city limits to the property line near North Beach.

Also included in negotiations was 1,309 acres west of Warren Wagon Road that includes IDL “Parcel L” and two small extensions of that property.

The Forest Service would also receive about 3,100 acres of IDL land in the McCall and Krassel Ranger Districts, much of which consists of isolated state properties surrounded by Forest Service land.

In exchange, IDL would receive roughly 18,000 acres of timber-producing land on the New Meadows Ranger District south of Lost Valley Reservoir Road and North of the Fruitvale Glendale Road.

The area extends about two miles west of U.S. 95 and about three miles east and would consolidate isolated IDL parcels into a contiguous property.

Also proposed was a transfer of about 3,500 acres of Forest Service land surrounding Tamarack Resort in areas to the south and northwest where the resort plans to expand operations in the future.