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United Payette: 91% very or extremely concerned' about Payette Lake privatization

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The Star-News

According to a recent survey, 91% of respondents in Valley County were very or extremely concerned that the state lands surrounding the Payette Lakes could be sold and privatized.

The survey was conducted this summer by the McCall nonprofit group United Payette, which presented results to the McCall City Council on Friday and to Valley County Commissioners yesterday.

The survey was sent to 6,738 addresses across Valley County seeking public opinion on a potential land exchange between the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) and the U.S. Forest Service.

The study itself was designed and conducted by the University of Idaho's College of Natural Resources and each participant was given a specific sign-in code in an effort to make the survey unbiased and accurate. Over 800 people completed the survey, according to United Payette.

The proposed swap referenced in the study was discussed between the Forest Service and IDL in 2024.

The swap was in the early stages of being privately negotiated between IDL and the Forest Service, but according to a public records request made by The Star-News, the agencies were considering trading 21,500 acres of Forest Service land for about 5,300 acres of IDL land, roughly 2,200 of which is currently endowment land around Payette Lake.

IDL told The Star-News on Tuesday that any potential swap is "still in a conceptual stage," no formal proposal has been finalized.

IDL is bound by the Idaho Constitution to maximize revenue from endowment land, meaning it must be logged, leased, sold or otherwise used to yield the greatest financial return. A land swap with the Forest Service would preserve public access and prevent the land from being privatized.

United Payette Board Member Brian Harris told the McCall City Council that the potential for a land swap is “stronger than ever” and is likely supported by the Idaho State Board of Land Commissioners, although negotiations could be on hold because of the ongoing federal government shutdown.

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

United Payette was founded with the mission of keeping those lands public in response to the PELS plan.

United Payette warned officials of the possibility of a private land swap similar to the 2021 proposal by Trident Holdings of Boise, which sought to trade 21,241 acres of timber land in Northern Idaho for 21,378 acres of state endowment land around the Payette Lakes.

The Idaho Land Board rejected the proposal, saying that the swap would not maximize the potential value of the properties near Payette Lake.

“Trident didn’t offer a good deal. If somebody offered a more profitable deal, they’d be more likely to take it,” warned United Payette Board Member Jeff Canfield.

The McCall City Council was supportive of the efforts to pursue a land swap that would see the Payette Lake properties and other IDL land remain open to the public.

“The future of the endowment lands, short and long term, is probably one of the single biggest issues that we as a community have,” said McCall City Council Member Mike Maciaszek.

“We’re so focused around the lake. But look at this from the standpoint of our greater community, if the state lands that go all the way down to Paddy Flat were to be sold to a private developer... all access on the east side of this valley to the forest would be cut off,” Maciaszek said.

While 91% of people countywide said they were either very or extremely concerned about the privatization of IDL land around the Payette Lakes, only 66% of all respondents supported the proposed land swap.

Those differed from city to city with 77% of McCall responses supporting the plan, with only 43% in Cascade and 34% in Donnelly in favor.

United Payette representatives said that opinion could be tied to a lack of information about how the agencies manage land and the potential for state land to be privatized and

that the majority of respondents were from McCall, the community most affected by a potential land exchange.

The survey also showed that responses from Donnelly and Cascade showed a higher percentage of people who were not familiar with the difference between state and federal land management or a proposed swap between the parties.

United Payette plans to present the data to the city councils of Cascade and Donnelly in the near future.

Survey findings:

- **98% of respondents believe management priorities for the lands surrounding Payette Lake and Little Payette Lake should focus on protecting water quality.**
- **99% of survey respondents believe that residential development does not provide a significant beneficial use of the endowment lands.**
- **93% of Valley County residents see increased residential development of the lands surrounding Payette Lake and Little Payette Lake as “very much a threat” or “an extreme threat.”**
- **87% of survey respondents view loss of wildlife habitat as either “very much a threat” or “an extreme threat.”**
- **Valley County residents indicated a preference for USFS (42%), Idaho Parks and Recreation (40%), and IDL (39%) as the agencies responsible for the management of the McCall endowment lands.**
- **69% of Valley County residents disagree that lands around Payette Lake and Little Payette Lake should be managed to maximize long-term financial returns.**
- **88% listed residential development as “not at all important” on endowment lands.**