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Idaho State Journal

Opinion: Idahoans must act to secure the public lands we own

- REP. BRITT RAYBOULD | Guest columnist

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This week, I introduced House Joint Resolution 8 to protect Idaho's endowment and public lands from being sold as our state continues to grow. Today, the Constitution requires the Idaho State Board of Land Commissioners to maximize long-term financial returns from endowment lands, even if that requires selling the land. HJR 8 updates this language to prioritize producing revenue from the land while providing public access, ensuring these lands remain available for recreation, hunting, fishing and grazing. This approach maintains our obligation to support public schools and other trust beneficiaries.



Britt Raybould

When Idaho became a state in 1890, the federal government granted us 3.6 million acres of land. The grant required the state to hold these lands in trust to benefit public schools and other state institutions. Over the last 135-plus years, Idaho sold about 1.2 million acres, roughly a third of those lands. While land sales have slowed in recent years, the speed of growth in Idaho poses a risk to protecting these lands in the future.

In a 2012 decision, the Idaho Supreme Court ruled that the Land Board must consider the possibility of a sale if the value of the land exceeds the income the state can generate from leases or other activities. As a result, lands suitable for grazing, hunting, fishing and recreation are more vulnerable to being sold as communities expand and land values increase.

Over time, open space becomes harder to justify financially under the constitutional requirement to maximize financial returns, even if keeping the land open is in the public interest. I know our current Land Board doesn't want this outcome. But the court's previous ruling means it's not just possible but increasingly likely unless we amend Idaho's Constitution.

Also, the Land Board, which includes the governor, the attorney general, the secretary of state, the controller and the superintendent of public instruction, will include different individuals in the future. The state can't afford to gamble that the people who fill those roles in the coming years will see things the same way as the board's current members. Idahoans must act to secure the public lands we own now.

The amendment protects the current process for timber sales, mining and grazing. The trust beneficiaries, including our public schools, will continue to benefit from these revenues. But we also ensure public access to these lands for all Idahoans. The 2012 court decision means public access can't play a role in the Land Board's decision-making.

If the state were to receive new public lands from the federal government in the future, the amendment applies the same management practices. The primary difference is that revenues from these lands would be deposited into a dedicated fund solely for their maintenance and operation. Idaho would also have a responsibility to honor any valid existing rights or obligations that came with those lands.

I know Idahoans care about public lands. We value access to those lands for many reasons and want to protect them. This amendment does that very thing. By removing the risk of a forced sale when land prices rise faster than potential ongoing revenue, we can continue to support trust beneficiaries while also providing access for all Idahoans.

Rep. Britt **Raybould** represents District 34 (Madison County) in the Idaho House. You can contact her at braybould@house.idaho.gov.