

Study: Land trade could cost county jobs, tax cash

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LEWISTON, Idaho (AP) — A \$12,000 study paid for by a north Idaho county that's fighting a proposed federal land swap concluded the transaction could lead to lost economic activity and jobs.

The study by [University of Idaho](#) economist [Steven Peterson](#) focused on a land trade proposal between the [U.S. Forest Service](#) and [Western Pacific Timber Co. Under](#) the plan, the government would exchange 18,000 acres in three national forests spanning several northern Idaho counties for nearly 40,000 private acres in Idaho County.

Peterson's study didn't address whether increased economic activity on the 18,000 acres in the Clearwater, Nez Perce and Idaho Panhandle national forests would balance out losses in Idaho County.

Idaho County opposes the trade on grounds that converting private land into federal holdings that already dominate the county will undermine its tax base and reduce timber harvests that remain the linchpin of the economy. Peterson concluded the trade could cost the county 128 jobs and \$8.2 million in lost economic activity.

"From an Idaho County perspective, it would be unwise to basically take any land that is in private production and put it in national forest land," Peterson told the [Lewiston Tribune](#) (<http://bit.ly/p6qaGX>) in a story Wednesday. "So I would not be in favor of a trade that would reduce the privately held land in Idaho County."

Western Pacific's owner, [Tim Blixseth](#), engineered land swaps in the 1990s in Montana that led to the creation of his opulent [Yellowstone Club](#). Blixseth lost the property in a divorce, the club went into bankruptcy months later and is now under new ownership.

Peterson's study doesn't include broader regional impacts but says the swap proposal doesn't adequately address the impacts on an area where the economy is based almost solely on natural resources and could be crippled if the exchange goes through. Converting private land to public land essentially means it won't produce any more logs for mills, since timber sales have dropped precipitously on federal land, he said.

Meanwhile, some observers say Western Pacific's private land is logged over, but Peterson says it could still produce 12 million board feet of lumber a year — raw material to help Idaho County sawmills survive.

The county doesn't want to lose roughly \$100,000 a year in property tax revenue, in addition to the potential impact on jobs in communities such as Grangeville and Cottonwood. Officials insist an exchange should take place entirely within Idaho County to limit its impacts, said

"When there are big takings by the federal government there is an economic impact," Idaho County Commissioner [James Rockwell](#). "We have just quantified that impact and it's big and massive."

The Forest Service wants Western Pacific's land because of its importance as habitat to steelhead and bull trout, Canada lynx and critical elk winter range. It also has historical value. Explorers Lewis and Clark trekked through it in the early 1800s. Western Pacific's property is arranged in a checkerboard pattern amid federal land, a patchwork dating back to the 19th century that helped speed development of railroads but has complicated modern management.

The current exchange proposal has been scaled back from a plan that once called for Western Pacific to get up to 28,000 acres of land within Benewah, Clearwater, Latah, Shoshone, Bonner, Kootenai and Idaho counties.

More groups than just the county have bristled at the idea of a swap of logged-over land for more-pristine forests elsewhere.

Last year, Friends of the Palouse Ranger District, Friends of the Clearwater, [Latah County Farm Bureau](#), Idaho for Wildlife, Western Lands Project and the [Lands Council](#) told the Forest Service if it wanted Western Pacific's property, it should pay for it, not trade for it.

Information from: Lewiston Tribune, <http://www.lmtribune.com>

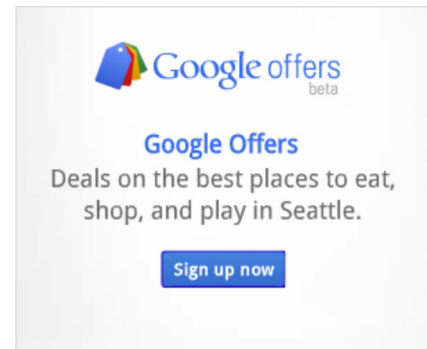
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