

Federal management destroying our public lands

Guest opinion by Mark Agather | January 26, 2020

Really! After 50 years of the federal government cutting off access of our, the state of Montana's public lands, by destroying or gating roads and, in addition, doing all it can to eliminate any and all logging in Western Montana, now the editorial board (and some county commissioners) are worried what Weyerhaeuser or the company they sell their land to will do? Where have you been? Or is it you feel you can take on a private land ownership without fear? If you really want to do something take on the federal government or, that notwithstanding, sit down and be quiet.

Yes, it is our, the citizens of the state of Montana's land. It is being held in "trust" for us by our "benevolent" federal government who pays us Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) since we, the citizens, can't make our public lands "productive." So, in essence they lease our lands from us. But what a deal! In Flathead County they pay us \$1.16 per acre. But we shouldn't complain as Sanders County only gets 59 cents and Lincoln County scrapes the bottom of the barrel at 39 cents. Talk about robber barons. For that pittance, the feds have gated or destroyed over 23,000 miles of roads, effectively shutting down access to over 5 million acres of our public lands. And you're worried about Weyerhaeuser's land?

It's long past time for the county commissioners of the three counties to recognize that they have a great deal of power over lands under their jurisdiction, particularly lands the state of Montana, in reality, owns. At the very least they should demand a minimum payment for PILT of \$5 per acre to make up for the lack of taxes the feds have effectuated by actively shutting down the logging industry. Secondly, they should demand that the county take over management of significant portions of our public land exempt from the lawsuits so prevalent today. Third, for those lands, they should commission a forest health plan which would give them the necessary information to know where logging, thinning and fire prevention should occur. Finally, they should inform the federal government of the roads that they are going to open up to give access for our citizens (and tourists), to allow for fire fighting equipment and people in event of a fire and to create permanent fire breaks as we used to have.

The Daily Inter Lake can contribute to this process by, first and foremost, supporting our county commissioners if they find the courage to do what they should. Secondly, the Inter Lake should do a serious, in-depth series of articles which would illuminate how the federal government got control of our land; how they reneged on their agreement with us; and how they have purposely destroyed so much of our industry that was so good for our communities and our natural resources as well.

The above, if accomplished, would certainly help but attacking a private entity won't. It's not their fault we have allowed such an anti-business, anti-logging atmosphere to be created here, so it would be terribly wrong of us to try to impede their abilities to make their lands productive. If the new owners want to gate, close or destroy roads, it's just a minor reflection of what our federal

government has already done. After all what's good for the goose, so to speak. But if our county commissioners took over control of our land who knows what deals they could effectuate. No matter what it certainly is worth the effort but it will take a lot of courage. I just hope that quality is not in short supply inside of our commissioners' offices.

— *Mark Agather lives in Kalispell*