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COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES

CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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I write to you as a fellow Idahoan fighting to preserve and protect our state's precious natural resources, a cornerstone of which is Idaho's lands.

In Idaho, our public lands are a treasured part of our way of life, offering recreational opportunities, abundant resources, and natural beauty. Over 62% of the land within Idaho's borders is controlled by the federal government. Some of this land was identified for federal control as a result of its mineral value, and other parts remained under federal control due to non-development during westward expansion, poor farming conditions, and terrain difficulties that posed challenges to homesteaders. This extensive federal government footprint in our state poses significant challenges to our autonomy in issuing leases for timber, grazing, and mining. A recent example of freedoms lost when Idahoans are not in control of Idaho affairs is the disastrous Lava Ridge Wind Project. In this situation, the Biden administration made clear they were willing to run roughshod over the State of Idaho and move forward with a wind farm development in Southern Idaho, despite consistent public outcry of disapproval.

After serving seven years in Congress, it is clear to me that the federal government—who is effectively our landlord—has failed to manage the lands wisely and has been derelict in working with state and local entities to reduce the risk of wildfires, provide the public with better access to natural resources, and address the overall health of our lands. Put another way, federal entities are overwhelmed. They don't have the resources to do all the management, so they don't. As evidence, current deferred maintenance for federal land management projects on public lands reached approximately \$50 billion in 2024, and moving forward, agency budgets will only see more pressure.

Last year, federal land mismanagement was a major factor in nearly one million acres of our beautiful Idaho going up in flames, a level of devastation that puts significant financial strain on our local economies. Having the majority of the Gem State's public lands under federal government control also forces us to rely on costly compensation programs from the federal government, like Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) and Secure Rural Schools (SRS). These programs, which are intrinsically tied to Idaho infrastructure projects, schools, and critical community services, are not a long-term solution and are growing increasingly difficult to garner support for in Congress, which is a harsh reality we must all take into consideration. The reason for this growing lack of support is that they are viewed as subsidies from other states to Idaho. I hear it all the time: Members of Congress from states without vast levels of federal land don't want to subsidize us anymore. It's important to note that, due in part to the large federal footprint in Idaho, more than a third of our state budget comes through federal sources. If this

issue is left unaddressed, we will have a real problem on our hands that will likely put unsustainable pressure on local property taxes.

Eventually, a transition of land management responsibility to state and local entities is imminent due to the aforementioned growing frustration. I frequently hear the argument that local stakeholders can't possibly afford to manage the lands within our borders. My response to that is long-term, we can't afford not to. Consider: In 2024, the total PILT received by Idahoans through federal channels (calculated by total receipts divided by total federal acres) came out to approximately \$1.25 per acre. I am confident that, given the ability to make our own land management decisions, a far greater return would be realized. But, we need to be proactive, have a plan, and be the drivers of the process.

The answer is to encourage local resource management. No one is better equipped or more incentivized to responsibly manage Idaho land than Idahoans. The goal is not privatization but better stewardship through local stakeholder involvement—the state, counties, municipalities, tribes, ranchers, and private operators, all working together, are the solution.

Our public lands need to stay public, but they need to be controlled locally.

In Congress, I've prioritized returning decision-making power to Idahoans and reducing federal red tape. That includes modernizing outdated laws like the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to enable better forest management, wildfire mitigation, and improved access for recreation and responsible development. As part of the EXPLORE Act, which was recently signed into law in conjunction with my bill, the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) program was expanded to allow counties and Tribes to participate in revenue sharing with the federal government on local forest projects—something only available to states until now. While these measures are a step in the right direction, additional reforms are needed, and we have a long way to go.

I have started holding a series of stakeholder meetings around the state, convening discussions with federal, state, local, and private interests to discuss best land management practices and how to effectively move forward. I encourage you to join these efforts and/or do the same within your sphere of influence.

As we collectively embrace this opportunity to be wise stewards of our state's natural resources and the responsibility to preserve and protect Idaho's land for future generations, know that I am a resource and ally in Congress, and I will continue to fight for Idahoans' right to manage the affairs of Idaho.

Sincerely,



Russ Fulcher, M.C.

1st District of Idaho