

Keep state lands open to the public and ecologically healthy

BY JEFF CANFIELD

We are the Payette Endowment Lands Alliance, a new grassroots organization working to conserve and protect the Idaho endowment lands located in the McCall area.

These lands, constituting approximately 28,000 acres of the 100,000 acres in the Idaho Department of Land's Payette Lakes Supervisory Area, surround Payette Lake and extend out from there in every direction.

Currently, under state constitutional authority, the Idaho Land Board holds these lands in trust for designated beneficiaries, primarily K-12 public education. We envision a future where the McCall area endowment lands and their ecosystem are protected and enhanced in perpetuity while generating revenue for the Idaho Endowment Trust.

It has become clear that the McCall area endowment lands are at risk of being sold or traded to private interests. For example, Trident Holdings LLC has expressed interest in acquiring these lands for development, and it is likely that numerous other companies will submit applications to the IDL to acquire specific parcels of endowment lands.

Why is this concerning? This land is owned by Idaho trust beneficiaries and man-

aged by IDL. Trading or selling it off to the highest bidder could come at the long-term expense of these beneficiaries.

Also, if these lands are privatized, gates will go up and the public should expect to lose access to them forever. Lastly, loss of the McCall endowment lands is a statewide issue. If big money can buy these lands, it can happen to endowment lands all over the state.

The long-term values of the McCall area endowment lands for the trust beneficiaries go far beyond their present dollar value. These lands provide a buffer around the lake and protect its water quality, which in turn enhances the value of the lands. These lands also provide viewsheds, wildlife habitat, and recreation, generating valuable tourism revenue and tax dollars that indirectly benefit public education.

These endowment lands are critical for the health and survival of our ecosystem and consequently must be protected for the beneficiaries and the citizens of Idaho who can continue to enjoy them as they have since statehood.

So what can the public do? Although the land board has the authority to decide the fate of endowment lands without public input, the public can attend the monthly land board meetings virtually or in person

and provide comments by email or mail prior to the meetings.

The next land board meeting is Nov. 17 at the Capitol in Boise. Agenda items are expected to include an update by the IDL of a draft strategic plan for McCall Area endowment lands and a presentation by Trident Holdings.

The public can provide comments about the items presented at the Nov. 17 meeting by writing to the Land Board and IDL prior to the subsequent meeting on Dec. 15. More information can be found on the IDL website at: <https://www.idl.idaho.gov/about-us/land-board>.

PELA supports forming a coalition to work together with the City of McCall, Valley County, Ponderosa State Park, and IDL to find pathways to keep the state lands open to the public, ecologically healthy and protective of the lake and the watershed while helping the state generate "long-term financial returns" for the trust beneficiaries. This would be a "win-win."

Currently, PELA is strategizing and collaborating with state and local officials, conservation organizations, and local people. To learn more about what we are doing, please visit our website that provides information and resources, including how to support PELA. The website address is

pelamccall.com. PELA's mailing address is P.O. Box 2351, McCall, ID 83638.

Over the past several months PELA has been contacted by many people. What has struck us most are the passionate feelings everyone has for this area.

Whether they were talking about crouching under a ponderosa in the rain to watch the mergansers playing and diving in the lake, hanging out with friends on the cliffs to watch the sunset, or taking their children to see the first spring flowers on the south facing slopes above Little Lake, all were verifying the joy in connecting to the natural world.

When trying to articulate the values of these experiences it's difficult to speak in the monetary terms the state demands. You can't say listening to the song of the creek as you lie on the granite rocks above Lake Fork Creek was worth \$50,000, but at that moment what it did for your heart was worth everything.

(Jeff Canfield is a board member of Payette Endowment Lands Alliance. Other board members are Lea' Albright, Judy Anderson, Melissa Coriell, Debbie Fereday, Jenn Gray, Julie Manning, Jeffrey Mousseau, Amy Rush, Douglas Smith, Dr. Darby Webb and Dr. Thomas Welty.)