

‘Gamble for Montana’s future’

Report says transferring federal lands to state would cost billions

BY MICAH DREW
DAILY MONTANAN

In Montana, where land managed by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management comprises 30 million acres — roughly a third of the state — the notion of turning swaths of terra firma to state control could be costly, according to a newly published report.

The report, written by longtime natural resources manager John Tubbs, calls the financial implications of federal lands transfer “staggering and disproportionately impactful for a rural state with large swaths of national public lands.”

“The costs associated with maintaining national public lands at the state level — ranging from wildfire operations to the loss of essential federal funding for rural counties — would be far too great for Montana to bear per capita,” the report states. It amounts to an \$8 billion “gamble on Montana’s future.”

Tubbs, who authored the report with support from the Montana Wildlife Federation, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Mountain Mamas and the Montana Conservation Voters Education Fund, is the former director of the Montana Department of Natural

Resources and Conservation under Democratic Gov. Steve Bullock.

The long simmering dispute over whether the federal government should relinquish lands managed by the Departments of Interior and Agriculture to individual states has been turned up at all levels, from the halls of Congress to Montana’s capital.

The estimated roughly \$8 billion increase to Montanan’s balance sheet would be primarily driven by the costs of managing the land, according to the report, including for wildfire, deferred maintenance backlogs, and abandoned mine reclamation.

Citing reports by the Legislative Fiscal Division, the report states that during the last 20 years, Montana has paid more than \$2.3 billion in wildfire mitigation costs on federal land — comprising just 25% of total cost, as the federal government covers 75% of costs.

A transfer of federal lands to state management would shift the cost of future wildland fire suppression to state taxpayers to the tune of \$5.5 billion — the bulk of the total.

On a press call about the report, Tubbs pointed to the essential partnerships with federal agencies — including the large fleets of firefighting aircraft operated by the Forest Service — and the difficulty in replicating that from the state or private industry.

“That is untenable,” he

said.

Tubbs also focused on Payment in Lieu of Taxes funds the federal government disseminates. The PILT program channels money to rural counties with swaths of untaxable federal land to support vital services such as public safety, housing, social services and transportation.

In fiscal year 2023, Montana counties received more than \$40 million in PILT funds — and another \$16 million from the similar Secure Rural Schools program — a loss the state likely couldn’t make up.

Tubbs said such a loss would result in the largest “unfunded mandate” in state history, and “several of Montana’s counties would be bankrupt— in particular, the 11 counties in which more than half of the acreage is owned by the federal government.”

The report also states that Montana would be on the hook for \$623 million in deferred maintenance and repairs on current federal lands; between \$474 million and \$1 billion for reclamation work on the state’s 5,000 abandoned mines; and a 1,600% increase in grazing fees.

“The state simply cannot afford the responsibility of managing such vast swaths of land without significant financial strain,” the report concludes.

Tubbs said the value of public lands goes far beyond the numbers, and supporters need to

strengthen efforts.

“The core value I think most of us find in public lands is there’s some landscape that means something to each of us,” he said on the press call.

Discussions about the federal lands transfer came to the forefront in Washington D.C. and nationwide following statements by the Trump administration that federal lands are part of the nation’s “balance sheet” and could be utilized to help pay off the national debt.

Earlier this month, the U.S. Senate passed a federal budget in a series of late night votes, and one particular budget amendment saw Montana’s two Republican Senators buck their party.

The amendment, brought by Sen. John Hickenlooper, D-Colorado, would have prevented the sale of public lands to lower the federal deficit.

Montana Sens. Steve Daines and Tim Sheehy joined all Democrats in supporting the amendment, but it was defeated 49-51.

In a similar vein, Republican U.S. Rep. Ryan Zinke, Montanan’s western representative, reintroduced his “Public Lands in Public Hands Act,” earlier this year with a Democratic senator from New Mexico.

The provision would ban the U.S. Department of Interior and U.S. Forest Service from selling or transferring “most public lands” except in specific circumstances. It also would require Congressional approval

for disposals of publicly accessible federal land tracts over 300 acres and for public land tracts over 5 acres if accessible via a public waterway.

“In Montana, public lands are our way of life. It’s not just Yellowstone and Glacier, it’s also the BLM and Forest Service areas where a kid fills their first tag, a lake in the Beartooths that is the perfect picnic spot, and the trail just down the road that helps you clear your head after a long workday,” Zinke, a former Secretary of the Interior during Trump’s first term, said in a press release. “Public lands must remain public, and the federal government has a responsibility to manage and ensure access to those lands.”

Earlier this month, Montana’s eastern representative, Republican Troy Downing, signed on as a cosponsor to the legislation, as did Idaho Republican Rep. Mike Simpson.

In Helena this legislative session, Montana’s state lawmakers also got to offer their own takes on the issue thanks to a lawsuit filed by the State of Utah against the federal government in favor of land transfer.

The suit, which claimed federally-managed land infringed on the state’s sovereignty and sought a return of millions of acres, was rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Despite that, freshman Rep. Tom Millett, R-Marion, introduced a reso-

lution supporting Utah’s position.

While Millett stated House Resolution 24 did not concern Montana’s federal public lands, his comments were broadly applicable to all states.

“Nothing in the U.S. Constitution authorizes the federal government to hold vast unreserved swaths of unreserved territory in perpetuity over the states’ express objection,” he told the House Energy, Technology and Federal Relations Committee during a hearing. “The U.S. generates significant revenue from these unappropriated lands — millions of dollars annually that would go toward our counties and schools. But instead, we get but a pittance, leftover crumbs from what should be our lands.”

The bill passed out of committee on partisan lines, but saw broad bipartisan opposition on the floor.

“Montanans have overwhelmingly rejected transfer time and time again,” Rep. Debo Powers, D-Whitefish, told her colleagues during the debate. “In fact, 87 percent of Montana voters considered the conservation — not the transfer, but the conservation — of public land to be influential in their voting decisions. That’s why so many political candidates in Montana from every political party pledged to keep public lands in public hands.”

The bill failed to pass the House floor in a bipartisan 33-66 vote.

Senate pushes \$250M bill for new women’s prison, \$6M bill for closed sawmills

Concern about property taxes overlays discussions about other spending

BY KEILA SZPALLER
Daily Montanan

The tension about property taxes is filtering into debates about other bills including a proposal to spend \$250 million on a new women’s prison and another bill to allocate \$6 million for sawmill revitalization.

Both proposals, however, advanced this week.

House Bill 833

would set aside money for a new prison, and in an interview Wednesday, sponsor and Rep. John Fitzpatrick, R-Anaconda, said the women’s prison in Billings is well over capacity.

It houses 240 people, but he said Montana needs beds for at least 400, possibly 500.

“Unlike the men, we have no place to put them out of state,” he said, referring to a contract with CoreCivic that sends male inmates to prisons in Arizona and Mississippi.

Fitzpatrick said the bill includes a study the Department of

Corrections will lead to determine a new location for a women’s prison — not excluding Billings or Deer Lodge, where the men’s prison is located, but not favoring them either, he said.

“It could be anywhere,” Fitzpatrick said.

He anticipates that study should be complete by the end of the calendar year, and a groundbreaking could take place in roughly a year. He said the current women’s prison likely would be eventually repurposed by the state.

On the Senate floor Tuesday, Sen. John Esp, R-Big Timber, said the female population with the Department of Corrections has been rising faster than the male population, and just one “relatively small” facility houses women in the state.

“There’s no option to contract with others for this population,” Esp said.

Esp said the waiting list for the women’s prison in Billings has about 85 people, and the facility is probably eight to 10 people over capacity.

“And they don’t turn over very fast,” Esp said.

The bill would allow the state to build a new facility, or a private contractor to do so and sell or lease it back to the state, Esp said.

Sen. Jeremy Trebas, R-Great Falls, said he acknowledged the problem, but he had a hard time spending so much money with

property taxes yet to be resolved.

“We’re going to spend \$250 million on prisons before we figure out what we’re going to do with property taxes,” said Trebas, who voted against the bill.

On a final 46-4 vote Wednesday, the Senate approved HB 833, including with support from all Billings legislators. The bill earlier passed the House 86-12, also with support from Billings legislators.

It is included in the governor’s budget.

Later the same day, the Senate also advanced a major property tax bill, House Bill 231, and the House advanced another one, Senate Bill 542, but both proposals still need to clear multiple votes to pass.

The Senate also approved House Bill 876, the Sawmill Revitalization Act, sponsored by Rep. Fitzpatrick and Rep. Connie Keogh, D-Missoula.

It passed 29-21 on Wednesday, and also raised questions about property tax bills.

The bill sets aside \$6 million for loans with interest rates of a maximum 4% “to parties with the capacity to revitalize a closed sawmill and return it to commercial operation.”

Originally, the bill had given priority to sawmills that had closed in the 12 months before Jan. 1, 2025.

In March 2024, Pyramid Mountain Lumber announced it

would close its Seeley Lake mill.

In the Senate Finance and Claims Committee, however, Esp proposed an amendment to strike that limitation, and the committee approved it.

On the Senate floor Tuesday, Sen. Mike Cuffe, R-Eureka, said in the 1970s, Montana had more than 50 operating mills, and it now has just five major ones.

In the last three years, mills closed in St. Regis and Seeley Lake, and Cuffe said the closures represent “major lost economic activity.”

Sen. Becky Beard, however, said the mill in Seeley Lake is pretty much dismantled, and it would take at least \$40 million to get it up and running again, not just \$6 million.

“There is not really anything left there except the shells of the buildings where the machinery was housed,” said Beard, R-Elliston, who voted against it.

Sen. Shane Morigeau, D-Missoula, said Montana has the lumber for the Seeley Lake mill, but it needs staffing, and the bill would help.

“We have people ready to come and do the work in Montana to get these facilities up and running. I think that’s a great thing for us,” Morigeau said.

Sen. Willis Curdy, D-Missoula, said the state sells roughly 60 million board feet of lumber a year, and the

mill is located close to state trust land timber.

He said every mile needed to move a log to a sawmill makes the lumber worth less to the state.

“This mill is located in a strategic location for the taxpayers of the state of Montana,” Curdy said.

But Senate President Matt Regier, R-Kaspell, said the \$6 million shouldn’t be spent that way.

Regier said he supports the industry and remembers seeing homemade signs in the Flathead in the 1990s that said, “This Family Supported by the Timber Industry.”

At the time, however, he said that industry supported itself.

“We’re spending taxpayer dollars to do what loggers did in the ‘90s,” Regier said.

Sen. Barry Usher, R-Billings, said even as the Senate tried to help a sawmill, it was contemplating a bill that would hurt commercial businesses.

He pointed to HB 231, which aims to support residential property taxpayers, but passes on increases to other groups, including commercial property taxpayers, he said.

Usher said he was told many people were lined up to try to help revitalize the sawmill at Seeley Lake, and he had a question:

“Were they advised in advance that if House Bill 231 passes, that their commercial property taxes are going up?”



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Attorneys for Personal Representative

Probate No. 53-2025-PR-00130
IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF WILLIAMS COUNTY, STATE OF NORTH DAKOTA
In the Matter of the Estate of CAROL JEAN ANDERSON, deceased.
NOTICE TO CREDITORS
NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the undersigned has been appointed personal representative of the above estate. All persons having claims against said deceased are required to present their claims within three (3) months after the date of the first publication or mailing of this notice or said claims will be forever barred. Claims must be presented to Crystal Noreen Hanson, or filed with the Court.
DATED this 8th day of April, 2025.
/s/ Crystal Noreen Hanson
621 42nd St. E., Apt. 1118
Williston, ND 58801
First publication on the 12th day of April, 2025
Date: April 12, 19, 26, 2025
WHM002384

The City of Williston, North Dakota is seeking a qualified company to provide airport janitorial cleaning services at the Williston Basin International Airport. Specifications and any other information may be obtained from the Airport Director’s Office or https://flywilliston.net/airport_information/doing_business/bid_opportunities.php

Sealed proposals shall be submitted to the following:

Anthony Dudas – Airport Director
City of Williston – Airport
14127 Jensen Lane, Suite 200
Williston, ND 58801
701-875-8594, ext. 9

Proposals MUST be received on or before **MAY 30, 2025, at 12:00 PM CDT**. There will be no public opening of the proposals received. All proposals must be marked in sealed envelopes and submitted on the outside of the envelope as follows:

**REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS
XWA - AIRPORT JANITORIAL
CLEANING SERVICES
CITY OF WILLISTON AIRPORT
“DO NOT OPEN”**

Any proposals received after the time and date stated above will be returned unopened and not considered as responsive.
Date: April 26, May 3, 2025
WHM002427

Request for Proposals -
**XWA - AIRPORT JANITORIAL
CLEANING SERVICES**
Williston Herald Publication
(Publish the following on 04/26/2025
and 05/03/2025)

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS