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## Deal in works to transfer public land to county in Idaho

By Ken Olsen  
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The Nature Conservancy is helping negotiate the proposed transfer of thousands of acres of public land -- including a slice of the Sawtooth National Recreation Area -- to Custer County, Idaho.

The county plans to sell the land to finance economic development and other projects if the proposal wins Congressional approval. In exchange for Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management acreage and other considerations, Custer County Commissioners are expected to support wilderness designation for a portion of the Boulder-White Cloud mountains -- an area at the heart of Idaho's wilderness debate for decades.

The Conservancy is helping broker the deal in part because of its land exchange expertise but emphasizes it is not advocating wilderness protection.

"We are trying to be an innovative deal creator," said Sally Boettger, of the Nature Conservancy's Sun Valley office.

Disposing of federally managed public land as a quid pro quo for Congressionally designated wilderness was pioneered in Oregon and Nevada over the past three years. Now it's going to become the rule, predicts Lindsay Slater, chief of staff for U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, who is calling this proposal the "Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act."

"We think stand-alone wilderness is done," Slater said. "The trend seems to be towards legislation based on compromise among the various interests."

Indeed, the Idaho Conservation League, which has lobbied for Boulder-White Clouds wilderness for more than 20 years, says the Custer County effort could become the model for other Idaho wilderness deals. The Boise-based environmental group is withholding endorsement until it sees the legislation Rep. Simpson plans to unveil this summer, but is open to striking a bargain.

"Part of what we're trying to do is prove wilderness can still be done," said Rick Johnson, executive director of the Idaho Conservation League. "This is as close as I've ever felt."

But where the Conservancy and the Idaho Conservation League see reasoned compromise, others see a dicey precedent.

"Over time, this could become the established method of buying wilderness," said Steve Wolper, a Ketchum-area conservationist and founder of Citizens for Smart Growth. "It might only be 10,000 acres this time, but 50,000 acres the next and 100,000 acres the next."

**Land Locked:** The quest to protect the Boulder and White Cloud mountain ranges dates to the early 1970s, when its tallest crag -- Castle Peak -- was eyed for a molybdenum mine. Mine opponents helped propel Cecil Andrus into the governor's seat and prompted Congress to create the Sawtooth National Recreation Area to give the area some measure of protection, environmentalists say.

Decades of effort to make this series of peaks and high-elevation valleys a wilderness area, as part of a statewide wilderness bill, failed. The Idaho Conservation League decided to try for legislation focused only on the Boulder White Clouds.

Soon after Congressman Simpson was elected, the group gave him an aerial tour of the territory.

"I told Simpson 'Castle Peak could be as good for you as it was for Cecil Andrus. I'll make it that good for you,' " ICL's Johnson said.

One of the biggest hurdles may be winning support from Idaho's senior senator, Republican Larry Craig, he added.

But if Craig gets behind the current Boulder White Clouds proposal, "I will join [Craig] on the Clearwater and we will start dealing," Johnson said, referring to a large piece of roadless national forest in northern Idaho.

"Some of that can be open to good old fashioned multiple use."

Custer County, however, blames its economic woes on the fact that 96 percent of its 3.15 million acres are federal land, split between the National Recreation Area, the Salmon-Challis National Forest and BLM's Challis resource area. Livestock grazing and a bit of mining are the only extractive industries remaining. Wilderness designation will only make matters worse.

"We're broke now," said County Commissioner Wayne Butts, who supports Simpson's plan to give federal land to the county. "We have no private land. We have a proposed playground for the rich and famous and the rest of us have to pay taxes."

**Terms of the Deal:** After being approached by Simpson last fall, the Conservancy hired two people to help the county compile a list of public land it wants. They also are helping the county develop a way to sell the land -- which will add private acreage to the property tax rolls, generate money for economic development and education and fund habitat improvement projects for ranchers who are out of compliance with endangered species regulations.

A portion of the Boulder White Clouds would get wilderness protection, although the size of that wilderness area is in question. Conservationists have long pushed for 500,000 acres. Commissioner Butts says he'll agree to 120,000 acres and "I'll fight the rest of it."

Simpson is proposing protecting the 250,000 acres recommended for wilderness by the Forest Service and BLM.

Idaho Conservation League says it is willing to accept less than 500,000 acres. But 250,000 acres is too small.

Water could be a far more important issue. Simpson's legislation will stipulate that a Boulder White Clouds Wilderness area have no water rights -- based on a similar measure establishing wilderness in the Las Vegas area last year. And Idaho Conservation League is not objecting.

Water experts find that extremely alarming, especially considering the Boulder White Clouds are birthplace to four major rivers.

"What's a wilderness area worth without a water right?" said Washington state water rights attorney Rachael Paschal Osborn. This allows people with existing water rights for grazing or mining to go after the water as well as opening the door to new claims.

"In these water-short times in the West, that will inspire someone to figure out how to get at it," Osborn said. "When you talk about buying and selling property as part of [this wilderness] deal, the opportunity for corruption increases many fold."

**Uneasy Victory:** When they tally the costs and benefits, other groups are uneasy with the Custer County/Boulder White Clouds bargain.

"They are going from protecting our public land to disposing of it to advance their own interests," said Janine Blaeloch, director of the Western Land Exchange Project in Seattle. "Environmentalists are saying we don't care how much it costs, how many bad precedents it sets or the implications for the future."

"This is the staunchest effort to undermine the wilderness process that I've seen in my 20 years of working on the issue," added Ron Mitchell, director of the Idaho Sporting Congress.

Simpson's chief of staff says this misses the benefits.

"When people are concerned with the proposed land grants to the county, they need to look at the overall conservation component, " Slater said. "If we are going to have wilderness, it is going to look like this."

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Pacific Northwest journalist Ken Olsen is a 2003 Alicia Patterson Foundation journalism fellow.



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