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Past trades reveal lopsided exchanges

Even as Aaron Jones pressed ahead with his Umpqua Land Exchange Project, the swapping of public and private lands was coming under increasing criticism nationwide.

A federal audit, for instance, showed the U.S. Forest Service gave public land worth an average of \$1,415 an acre and received private land worth \$780 an acre in exchanges through the 1990s.

The General Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, cited these examples of abuses in a 2000 report:

- In Utah, an appraiser for a private landowner in a proposed swap evaluated the private land at \$7,000 an acre, but a government appraiser put it at \$1,000 an acre.

The government ignored its own appraisal and gave the private land credit of \$7,440 an acre in the exchange - even more than the landowners had asked for.

- In Nevada, the private recipient in a swap resold the federal land he had just received that same day for two to six times the amount at which it had been valued in the exchange.

- In Washington, Weyerhaeuser Co. swapped land with the federal government, clear-cut the land it received, then traded it back to the government. A federal judge said the trade was "lopsided" in favor of the timber company.

The GAO recommended that Congress outlaw exchanges and instead use market-driven sales.

Congress didn't go that far, but lawmakers asked federal land agencies to clean up their act. The agencies removed the authority to make high-value swaps from their field offices.

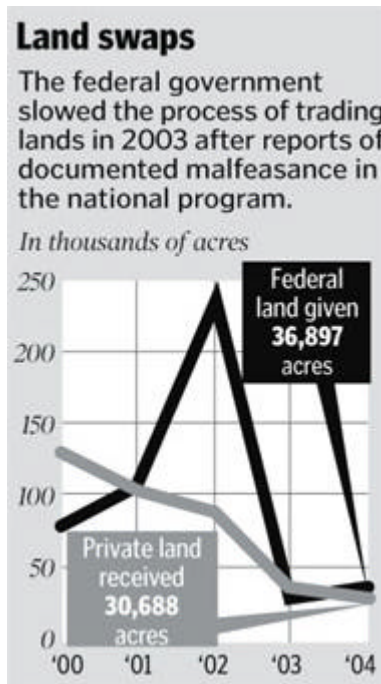


Illustration: **Stephanie Barrow** / The Register-Guard

Those now need high-level approval from Washington, D.C. Since the 2000 report, the number of federal swaps fell 68 percent, agency statistics show.

The Seattle-based Western Land Exchange Project watchdog group viewed Jones' project with a jaundiced eye. "This was really going to become a machine used to crank out one land exchange after another, and the bottom line was going to be handing more timber to the timber companies," said Janine Blaeloch, director of the citizen group.

Advocates of Jones' project acknowledge that they faced an uphill battle.

"The precedent is that many (exchanges) have not been in the public's interest. There's a lot of that 'skeleton in the closet' that made people skeptical of our process," said Rob Gill, director of the Umpqua project.

- Diane Dietz

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