

Idaho Panhandle Public Lands Initiative

Meeting Notes

March 13, 2025

Location

Community Resource Envision Center, 130 McGhee Road, Suite 220, Sandpoint.

Attendees

Alan Harper, Bob Hays, Brad Smith, Chuck Roady, Ed Atkins, Ellen Sanford, Erik Olson, George Gehrig, Glenn Patterson, Greg Williams, John Finney, Rod Barclay, Rose Olson, Stan Meyers, Susan Simmons, Carol Jenkins, Irv Jenkins

Priest Lake outreach

- Recent outreach was conducted with the Priest Lake Groomers Association and the Priest Lake Sportsman's Club.
- The Groomers Association submitted a letter regarding the potential expansion of the Salmo-Priest Wilderness, requesting a boundary modification to exclude Hughes Meadow from the proposal.
- Additionally, the Selkirk Chapter of the Backcountry Horsemen was identified as another key group in the area that should be contacted.

Scotchman Peaks, Lightning Creek, and Trestle Creek discussion

- A 14,000-acre wilderness proposal for the Idaho side of the Scotchman Peaks was presented, reflecting the Forest Service's recommendation included in the 2015 Land Management Plan for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.
- Input from the snowmobile community included creating a larger buffer between the wilderness boundary and Lightning Creek Road to allow for the removal of hazard trees that could fall onto the road and obstruct traffic.
- Another suggestion was to modify the boundary near Drift Peak to provide access to a portion of the area that was historically used by snowmobilers.
- An alternative smaller wilderness designation was presented, excluding portions of the Thunder, Savage, Morris, and Regal Creek drainages and adjusting the boundary higher up the slope on the southwest face of Scotchman Peak and Goat Mountain.
- These modifications were proposed to address concerns about elk habitat management, forest health, and fuel loads.
- Additionally, it was noted that for Clark Fork and Hope to support any Scotchman Peaks wilderness proposal, it would need to be packaged with increased motorized access. Specific suggestions for increases in motorized access included:

- Reopening the East Fork Creek road toward Lightning Mountain to full-size vehicles.
- Reopening the Porcupine Lake Road to full-size vehicles (currently limited to ATVs and vehicles under 40 inches wide).
- Reopening the Mud Creek Road to full-size vehicles.
- Reopening an old road in the upper Rattle Creek area to ATVs.
- A desire was also expressed to restore and maintain non-motorized trails in the Lightning Creek area.
- The attendees who presented the smaller wilderness designation were open to expanding their proposed boundary to include portions of the excluded drainages, provided that legislation allows for the use of prescribed fire within the wilderness to reduce fuel loads, improve forest health, and create forage for game species.
- There was also discussion about the potential impacts of increased motorized access on grizzly bears, with some attendees emphasizing the importance of ensuring that any changes do not interfere with grizzly bear recovery efforts.

Land exchanges

- A proposal for a land exchange involving private and state timberlands in Boundary County and Forest Service lands was presented.
- Private timberlands in Smith, Myrtle, Snow, and Caribou Creeks, as well as Hall Mountain, could be voluntarily exchanged for Forest Service lands on Dawson Ridge.
- State of Idaho timberlands in Myrtle, Snow, and Caribou Creeks could be voluntarily exchanged for Forest Service lands in Twentymile, Trail, and Grouse Creeks.
- Potential benefits of the exchanges include:
 - Consolidates land ownership, improving management efficiency.
 - Secures continued public access to trails that currently cross state and private timberlands.
 - Increases protections for endangered species habitat, placing more under public ownership and less under state and private ownership.
- Two private land parcels in Bonner County—one near the Scotchman Peak Trailhead and one on Lightning Creek Road adjacent to the Forest Service boundary—could also be voluntarily exchanged for scattered Forest Service parcels between Hope and the Idaho-Montana border. These exchanges would:
 - Allow for the relocation of the Scotchman Peak Trailhead to a more suitable location.
 - Create a snowmobile trailhead for the Lightning Creek area.
- Attendees raised questions about conservation easements, specifically whether existing easements on state or private lands included in the exchange would transfer to public lands acquired by private or state landowners under the proposal.
- One attendee cautioned that sportsmen may be opposed to land swaps if they result in trading existing forested lands for heavily cutover private or state lands.

Land transfers

- A proposal was presented to transfer all Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in Bonner and Boundary Counties to the Forest Service.
- The BLM manages approximately 16,000 acres in these counties but does not have an office in either. The nearest BLM office is in Coeur d'Alene.
- These BLM parcels are scattered throughout the counties, and when management activities are needed, the Forest Service typically conducts the planning and environmental reviews. However, the BLM must still complete its own approval and appeals process, creating inefficiencies.
- Transferring these parcels to the Forest Service would streamline management, eliminate duplication, and ensure more consistent oversight of public lands in both counties.

Next steps

- The April meeting will be held in Bonners Ferry. The agenda will include a discussion of the Upper Pack River and continued discussions about the Selkirk Mountains between Harrison Peak and the US-Canada Border.
- The May meeting will be held in Sandpoint as planned, but the group would like to hold the June meeting in Priest Lake.