

Don't give up public land

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By Tim Palmer

The Republican Party platform has supported liquidation of federal land by giving it away, and on the opening day of the new Congress, the House of Representatives began paving the way to do just that.

Buried in a package of House rule changes on Jan. 3, an obscure provision banned the Congressional Budget Office from considering lost federal revenue if public land is transferred to other entities. In other words, Congress and we taxpayers are blocked from knowing the values of what we would lose. Those values are already missing in rhetoric about "taking back" federal land.

To be clear, nobody can take public land "back." Our national forests, national parks, national wildlife refuges and Bureau of Land Management acreage have been owned by America's taxpayers since the founding of our nation. States, counties, businesses or privilege-seeking people can't "take back" what they never owned. They can only take federal land away from the American people - each and every one of us. Together, we own the world's greatest estate of mountains, forests, deserts, grasslands, and rivers. But not for long if the Republican House members have their way.

Even if a member of Congress thinks our common inheritance in public land should be given away - and it's no secret that the ultimate benefactors would be oil companies, multinational mining corporations and deep-pocket political contributors - how did our elected representatives rationalize a ban on simply knowing the value of what we taxpayers would be relinquishing?

Thanks to this vote, the House is set to turn a blind eye to sensible economic analysis that any of us would demand for decisions about our own property, and about decisions that should - in any ethical or constitutional context - be in the best interests of American taxpayers. The Jan. 3 rule change was a know-nothing triumph; it passed along party lines, 234 to 193. Rep. Greg Walden, Oregon's only Republican representative, voted in favor.

Nonpartisan economic studies by organizations such as Headwaters Economics in Bozeman, Montana, repeatedly find that public land is an asset - not a cost - to Western communities and to our nation.

As a resident of a state and a county with half their acreage in federal ownership, I'm convinced that federal land is the best thing about living in the West. I can fish, hunt, walk, drive or just look at open space almost out the back door here in Southern Oregon. In contrast, 38 states have only nominal amounts of public land.

Our public land belongs to all of us. It provides us with clean water, pure air, resource and land management jobs, recreation serving not only our sanity, happiness and family vacations, but also \$17 billion in economic activity for Oregon alone, according to the Outdoor Industry Association, not to mention open space that makes our communities livable and desirable for everyone.

Our federal land in the West gives us a way of life that's uniquely ours, and it should not be given away.

In its first day in office, on Jan. 3, the House of Representatives did a disservice to us all.

- *Tim Palmer of Port Orford (www.timpalmer.org) is the author of "Rivers of Oregon," "America's Great National Forests" and "Field Guide to Oregon Rivers."*