

Wyoming threatens to sell prime Grand Teton land

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Mead Gruver

Grand Teton National Park spokeswoman Jackie Skaggs strolls across a square mile section of state land in the park near Moose, Wyoming. Wyoming is trying to force the Interior Department to trade land, minerals or mineral royalties for 1,366 acres it owns within the park. If the foot-dragging feds don't agree to a deal soon Gov. Dave Freudenthal threatens to put a For Sale sign on the property. (AP Photo/Mead Gruver)

MOOSE, Wyo. — For Sale: Two square miles of Grand Teton National Park.

Majestic views of the Teton Range. Prime location for luxury resort, home development. Pristine habitat for moose, elk, wolves, grizzlies.

Price: \$125 million. Call: Gov. Dave Freudenthal.

Wyoming is trying to force the Interior Department to trade land, minerals or mineral royalties for 1,366 acres it owns within the majestic park. If the foot-dragging feds don't agree to a deal — soon — Freudenthal threatens to put a For Sale sign on the property.

Wyoming has owned the land since statehood in 1890, when the federal government set aside land in new Western states to be mined, logged or leased to raise money for public education. Wyoming kept its so-called "school sections" after Grand Teton National Park was established in 1950.

The state has tried for a decade to negotiate some kind of trade. Saying that his patience is running out, Freudenthal, a Democrat, sent an ultimatum recently to park Superintendent Mary Gibson Scott.

"I think he wants to pound the (for sale) sign in himself," said Ed Grant, director of the Office of State Lands and Investments.

Wyoming gets just \$3,000 a year from the land by leasing it for cattle grazing. Sold with the proceeds invested at 3 percent, the land easily could bring in \$3.75 million a year.

The state constitution requires state officials to manage state lands for maximum profit. Their oaths of office require them to act.

"If it's to recreate on, or if it's a new ski lodge, highest and best use," said Susan Child, deputy director of the state lands office. "It's obviously not grazing."

Even in pro-development Wyoming, however, selling off land in a national park isn't a popular idea. Some are protesting already.

But Freudenthal, who has a long history of run-ins with the Interior Department over endangered species and snowmobiles in Yellowstone National Park, isn't stepping on any toes he hasn't smashed already. What's more, he's wrapping up his second term and will leave office next year. He's all but enshrined as one of the most popular governors in Wyoming history.

"We're going to continue to push on it," he said. "Somehow we've got to get some attention."

Freudenthal certainly has grabbed the park's.

"These are wildlife-rich habitats completely surrounded by pristine park land," said park spokeswoman Jackie Skaggs. "For obvious reasons, Grand Teton National Park would be very, very concerned and disappointed if these lands were sold for development."

A deal wouldn't be unprecedented: Utah in 1999 worked out an elaborate swap involving nearly 600 square miles of state land within several national parks, monuments and recreation areas. The state got \$50 million plus 240 square miles of federal land in return.

In 2003, Sen. Craig Thomas, R-Wyo., got a bill passed that was supposed to encourage some kind of swap in Grand Teton. But Thomas died in 2007 and a deal has been elusive.

Discussions to trade the Grand Teton land for 800,000 acres of U.S. Bureau of Land Management land got nowhere. Wyoming officials said the BLM land is undesirable.

"Trash land," said Grant. "The state said, 'No, we've got prime, in-park real estate.'"

A plan to trade coal rights bogged down when Wyoming didn't agree to a federal plan for valuing the reserves.

"I admit we're not as bright as those boys on the Potomac," Freudenthal said. "But it's not our first county fair."

The Interior Department continues to work with Wyoming to resolve the matter, said Interior spokeswoman Kendra Barkoff.

Both sides are working on getting an updated appraisal for the state land. A 2005 appraisal put the land's value at \$98.5 million. Wyoming officials figure it's now worth between \$100 million and \$125 million.

The land consists of two parcels of a square mile each plus a handful of other lots. All are in the southern end of Grand Teton with views of the world-famous Teton Range.

The only real value comparison is the private land remaining in Grand Teton.

Such "inholdings" are among the most desirable properties in pricey Jackson Hole. A 0.86-acre inholding with a modest house, for example, listed for \$1.9 million in 2007.

"It was a feeding frenzy. We had three offers in 24 hours," said David Viehman, with Jackson Hole Real Estate Associates.

The National Park Service has been gradually acquiring inholdings to add to the park over the years, leaving Wyoming by far the largest owner of park inholdings.

"They've been pretty aggressive about picking up private inholdings to keep people from developing them, and have always assumed they got the use of the state's land without paying for it," Freudenthal grumbled. "Why buy the cow when the milk's free?"

Public opposition could tamp down the value of the state land as a property that realistically could be developed, giving the federal government an upper hand in negotiations. Recently a group called Save Historic Jackson Hole took out an ad in the Jackson Hole News & Guide urging people to write Freudenthal and oppose any auction.

"We don't think that's a good solution, to go the private sector," said the group's executive director, Armond Acri. "Any development there is going to be problematic."