

GOP candidates talk about feds releasing control of Western lands

By Rocky Barker and Dan Popkey, Idaho Statesman

GOP presidential candidate Rick Santorum's call to sell or transfer federally owned public lands Tuesday night in Boise earned him several rounds of applause.

But Idaho Gov. Butch Otter found in 2005 that while Idahoans don't like how federal lands are managed, they don't want to lose access to the places they hunt, fish and camp.

President Herbert Hoover and former Interior Secretary James Watt learned similar lessons in their times.

But Santorum's detailed proposal on an issue close to the heart of Westerners may help set him apart from Republican Mitt Romney in the March 6 Republican caucus, which is expected to attract the most devoted party members.

"We need to get it back into the hands of the states and even to the private sector," Santorum told an overflow crowd at Boise's Capital High School. "And we can make money doing it."

Santorum said national parks like Yellowstone and Grand Canyon should remain under federal management. But based on the poor management he has seen in the federal lands in his home state of Pennsylvania, he said he believes Westerners could do better.

"We do not need this huge amount of federal land under federal purview and I would be happy to work with your senators and congressmen out here in the West to put a plan together that's going to have a much more responsible management of land in the West than we've had in the last many years, OK?"

Santorum isn't the only Republican in the race urging the federal government to transfer public land.

Rep. Ron Paul has called for eliminating the Department of Interior, which manages more than 500 million acres of public land and a big chunk of Idaho, almost two-thirds of which is owned by the federal government.

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