

Rural Idahoans hoping to save a bit of Old West

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The West is a land of irony — people come for the open spaces, then fill them up.

In the Old West, cows outnumbered people and hunters roamed across the land as freely as their abundant prey. Now herds of cattle are being replaced by clusters of homes, and the only sounds of a stampede come from developers pounding on the doors of rural landowners and counties waving fistfuls of development applications.

The doorway to the West's open spaces is quickly closing, causing consumers of the Western landscape to scramble for their piece. Families who have ranched or farmed the land for generations are facing difficult times and difficult choices.

"We all love what we do," said Jennifer Ellis of Blackfoot, a lifelong Idaho rancher and hunter. "The intrinsic values that come along with what we do — working side by side with our kids and our parents, viewing life from horseback: I mean, you just can't beat these things."

But Ellis said the economy, government regulations and "trying to justify our existence to people" are taking a toll on the rural lifestyle. "The bureaucracy and bleeding from a thousand paper cuts gets to the point where the stress level overloads what you've been trying to accomplish, and that's when you see 5-acre ranchettes start to pop up," she said.

Ellis was among more than 150 ranchers, politicians, hunters and conservationists from across the state who gathered last week in Nampa for the Idaho Land Use Summit.

From old to new and into the EXURBS In the Old West, the "highest and best use of the land" was for ranching, logging and mining, said Richard Knight, a Colorado State University professor.

But in the New West, he said, "the highest and best use of private land is for residential development. The highest and best use of public land is for outdoor recreation." Tight government regulation of an already economically strained industry has backed many farmers and ranchers into a corner, panelists said. Add consumer demand for rural spaces and public demand for access to private land to the mix and suddenly many ranchers are throwing up their hands in despair and selling off part or all of their land.

That's where "exurbs" come in, another new term Idahoans are learning.

"We Americans are consumers of good places," Knight said. "We started in an urban environment and didn't like those, so we created the suburb after the second world war. We grew tired of these and invented the exurbs, which are basically suburbs located miles from towns." Balancing private rights, public demand

Twenty-five percent of private land in the lower 48 states — one out of every four acres — is in exurban development, Knight said.

"The rate of conversion has been absolutely phenomenal. It was 5 percent in 1950," he said. "For the first time in more than 150 years, more people are moving to rural areas than we have people moving to urban areas."

In Idaho, private land is being consumed at a higher pace than the increase in population.

"Idaho over a 30-year period was growing on average just under 2 percent a year, but its landscape was being converted with exurban development at a rate almost four times greater," Knight said. Idaho is one of four states in the West in which more than half the land — about 60 percent in Idaho — is publicly owned. But some of the best water, soils and wildlife habitat are on privately controlled land, Knight said.

Balancing private property rights with public access to state-owned wildlife has become a challenge for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

"The biggest bogeyman that my agency's dealing with right now, with hunters and anglers, is how we maintain access in the face of this juggernaut of development," F&G Director Steve Huffaker said.

Large tracts of privately owned rural land are valuable to wildlife, and therefore hunters and anglers, Huffaker said, but landowners cannot assume the responsibility or costs of maintaining their land to benefit wildlife and the public without some help from the government.

NEW WEST fosters NEW ALLIES

Westward migration shows no sign of letting up — the five fastest growing U.S. states are Nevada, Arizona, Idaho, Utah and Colorado.

"If we don't engage, we will be run over," Ellis said. "The days of hoping to be left alone are over." In addition to helping her husband run their ranch in Blackfoot, Ellis is taking action to help preserve the rural lifestyle. She is vice president of the Idaho Cattle Association and was recently appointed to an F&G advisory panel.

Ellis is more comfortable operating a combine than speaking in public, but she said too much is at risk to stay quiet.

Government action can be glacial and inconsistent, which means other avenues to change must be considered, she said. Ellis said some of the best "on the ground" actions taking place to preserve rural lifestyle and open space are between conservationists and ranchers.

"We haven't seen before this level of commitment from conservation groups to work with ranchers," she said. "It's made for strange bedfellows." Ellis said she hopes to see more gatherings like the Idaho Land Use Summit in the future. But actions speak louder than words, and while ideas are easy to come by, implementation is not.

"If the people in this room can truly implement what's been talked about these last two days," she said Friday, "we can get an awful lot done in Idaho."

Managing the stampede of growth

As developers are rushing to grab open land in Idaho, small rural counties especially are feeling trampled and ill-prepared to handle the onslaught, Adams County Commissioner Judy Ellis said. Ellis faults the state of Idaho for not providing counties resources to deal with growth. "We are one of four states without technical support (to counties for planning), yet we are mandated by the state to plan," Ellis said. "There's not a full-time planner anywhere in our county. I'm a teacher and a dairyman. I didn't come prepared to write ordinances."

"If I were you," Idaho Association of Counties Executive Director Dan Chadwick told Idaho Land Use Summit participants, "I'd be a bit frightened about what's going on out in the counties in this state ... trying to grapple with the pressures of growth."

One new planning tool being test-driven in Ada County is Blueprint for Good Growth. Ada County

and its six cities joined forces two years ago to come up with a long-range plan that marries land-use and transportation decisions.

The group cleared a major hurdle last week when it unanimously adopted the first part of the plan — goals, objectives and policies. Next month, the group is slated to start reviewing the plan's second part — implementation strategies and intergovernmental agreements.

The plan is not state-funded or mandated, nor is it enforceable. Each agency can choose to implement all, some or none of Blueprint's recommendations. For more information, go to www.blueprintforgoodgrowth.com.