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Lincoln area land proposal finds support in recent University of Montana survey

By Roger Dey
BVD

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Roger Dey

A view taken last year during a flight over the Lincoln proposal area looks northwest, across the Copper Bowls and into the Scapegoat Wilderness. The Copper Bowls would be legally designated as a winter recreation area if the proposal were to be enacted by Congress.

Blackfoot Legislative Working Group) that developed the proposal.

UM's Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative conducted the survey of 500 Montana voters in mid-March and released it last month.

The legislative proposal was unveiled last spring after seven years of discussion and four years of collaboration between various user groups. Its goal is to improve forest management in the Upper Blackfoot by increasing recreational and restoration opportunities to help the local economy and by codifying protections for areas that are already de facto wilderness.

Good said the positive support shown by the survey was promising, since most public outreach has focused on areas directly affected by the proposal, including Lincoln, Canyon Creek and Avon.

"I thought it was great that it was supported pretty broadly by Montanans," Good said. "It gives a general idea of what people think about our proposal. Those probably aren't people who know all the ins and outs of our proposal, but just as a collaborative process trying to loop in a lot of key components in a positive way, so that's good."

Her observation may be apt, since the proposal question was framed in the survey as being developed by local land users. Another survey question showed that 71 percent of respondents rated community input on land management and conservation as extremely or very important.

Despite the lack of statewide exposure, support for the Lincoln proposal was nearly in line with similar efforts included in the survey. The Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project drew 75 percent support, while the Badger-Two Medicine Cultural Heritage Area, had 79 percent support. Increased protections for a wilderness study area in Gallatin range bordering Yellowstone National Park drew 77 percent support.

The 2020 Voter Survey on Public lands, a bi-annual University of Montana survey of opinions and attitudes toward the importance of public lands, included a question about the Lincoln Prosperity Proposal (formerly the Lincoln Valley Public Lands Proposal) that showed it had an unexpected level of statewide support.

The survey shows nearly 72 percent of respondents generally support the Lincoln-area legislative proposal. Twenty-three percent were generally opposed to it.

"We were pretty surprised that it was (included) because we haven't done a lot of broad outreach with the proposal," said Karyn Good, the primary coordinator for the Lincoln Prosperity Group (formerly the Upper

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The survey didn't delve into reasons behind support or opposition and Good thinks, those reasons could cut either way since it hasn't been widely publicized and "has a little bit of everything in it."

"Some people, they're not very open minded about taking a wilderness bill and throwing in things like snowmobiling or ATVing, or logging, for that matter," she said. Conversely, she said some people might be completely shut off to the idea of additional wilderness or Conservation Management Areas.

"It's kind of interesting that the numbers came up the way they did," she said. "I think it's a good thing, a really good thing."

Rick Graetz, director of the Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative, told the BVD that, in general, a high percentage of both Republicans and Democrats want to see public lands stay public.

"People recognize public land— whether it's National Parks, Forest Service lands, Wilderness – that they're an important part of this state's economy," he said.

Eighty-nine percent saw national public lands as important for the state's economy, up seven percent from 2018.

According to the survey statistics, 40 percent of the respondents ideologically consider themselves conservative, 39 percent identified as moderate while self-identified liberals made up 17 percent. Politically, 31 percent were Republicans, 26 percent were Democrats and the majority, 43 percent, identified as independents. Most respondents, 39 percent and 27 percent respectively, lived in a rural area or a small town.

Although Graetz wasn't directly involved with including the Lincoln question in the survey, he has often noted that Lincoln's position amid public lands is a largely untapped resource for the local tourist economy.

"A lot of people come here, come to Lincoln," he said. "Look at the country you have around Lincoln."

Good said the Lincoln Prosperity Group is planning to roll the proposal out to a wider audience as soon as they can. The COVID-19-related stay-at-home directive and the current phased reopening of the state led them to take a hiatus, but Good said they are taking the time to plan meetings in Helena and Great Falls.

"Its slow going. It's hard to plan public meetings when you don't know what tomorrow holds," she said. "We're just playing it by ear right now and as soon as we return to some normalcy, we'll hit the ground running."

As for yet another new name for the proposal and the group that developed it?

Good explained they took into consideration the various projects, plans and organizations in the Blackfoot Valley, many of which include "Blackfoot" in the name, and decide to go with something less likely to be confused with anything else. Good said once the proposal is sponsored by a senator and introduced as legislation, the name will change one last time to the Lincoln Prosperity Act.

If the folks who responded to the survey had their way, that would happen sooner rather than later. Eighty-five percent of them felt proposals developed through a public process with community input should be acted on by Congress within two years or less.

To check out the entire 2020 Public Land Survey, and earlier surveys, visit crown-yellowstone.umt.edu and look for the Voter Surveys link on the upper right of the page.



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