

# This land is my land — really

[writers on the range](#) - by Jane Braxton Little



Jane Braxton Little

President Bush wants to sell my land to fund rural schools. I mean *my* land — not the vast tracts of federal forests and grasslands I co-own with the proverbial New York cabbie, the Seattle widow and all other American citizens. My private land — the 12 acres I own with my husband. We bought it through a Forest Service land exchange in 2000 and have paid taxes on it ever since.

Yet there it is, a tiny green polygon on the maps described in the Feb. 28 *Federal Register*. There it is, part of the president's plan to sell 304,370 acres of Forest Service land to raise \$800 million to fund the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, a popular county payments program established in 2000.

If our speck of land in rural northeastern California were the only mistake in the president's funding plan, we could all laugh it off as another bureaucratic blunder. But the proposal is replete with errors. Some are like the inclusion of our property, mere slip-ups in a sloppy process done in haste. Others are far more troubling, suggesting a strategy that veers from simply incompetent to irresponsible.

Take California's Plumas National Forest, where agency officials have listed 700 acres that are already under contract to the Maidu stewardship project. This first-of-a-kind program was approved by Congress to demonstrate traditional Native American management techniques on national forest land. At best, the listing is a thoughtless error. At worst, it is a cynical response to an innovative undertaking.

Forest Service officials say the lands proposed for sale nationwide are difficult and expensive to manage. They insist the parcels are not environmentally sensitive or protected scenic areas. But the list includes 730 acres in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area in Washington and Oregon, archaeological sites in Alaska, and two parcels at the head of Swan Lake within a wildlife refuge in Montana.

A mile-long roadless area near Eagles Nest Wilderness is among the 21,000 acres for sale in Colorado. So are two popular rock-climbing areas in Boulder Canyon and a snowboarding site around St. Mary's Glacier. For spelunkers, Pluto Cave in California is part of a sale tract with spectacular views of Mount Shasta.

The list includes 1,300 acres of a rare low-elevation old growth forest in Washington's Sultan River Canyon. In Montana's Bitterroot Valley, Bush wants to sell the Willoughby 40, an outdoor classroom painstakingly restored to native pines and sagebrush and maintained by the Ravalli County Resource Advisory Committee, Forest Service employees and Lone Rock school kids. So much for collaboration.

Agency spokesmen admit they threw the parcel list together in a rush aimed at producing enough property value to come up with the funding commitment in the president's budget. They acknowledge that they used computer data that looked primarily at the size of the tracts and whether they were separated from the main body of the forest, not whether they played a role in recreation or other forest uses.

The president's proposal to sell national forest land to raise revenue for a one-time payment is the land-management equivalent of his strategy for leaving Iraq. It shows a profound lack of foresight. Resolving the mistaken listing of my land will likely require little more than a telephone call. It will take Congress to resolve the more significant errors of this foolish proposal.

The Forest Service has extended the comment period on the administration's land-sale proposal to May 1. Write USDA Forest Service, SRS comments, Lands 4S, 1400 Independence Ave., SW, Mailstop 1124, Washington, D.C., 20250-0030 or e-mail: [SRS\\_Land\\_Sales@fs.fed.us](mailto:SRS_Land_Sales@fs.fed.us).