Fact Sheet
State Endowment Land
Idaho Department of Land’s Pending Auction of Cougar Island

In January, United Payette coalition (UP) formed a task group to address the concerns associated with the Idaho Department of Lands planned auction of Payette Lake’s beloved Cougar Island. The task group and coalition have worked to research and understand the mechanisms of an auction of this nature, the history of the island, and the ecological and recreational values of this cherished natural landmark.

**Threat:** The sale of Cougar Island poses the threat of privatization and development, which would diminish the historic use and public access enjoyed by generations of visitors, threaten water quality in Payette Lake and downstream waters, and disturb wildlife in the ecosystem that includes this island and the surrounding areas.

**Auction:** The Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) plans to auction Cougar Island on July 30th. IDL’s appraisal (2021) value for the entire island, including the current leaseholder’s parcel and Stone House, is $6,290,000. In 2014 IDL subdivided the 14.21-acre island into 5 parcels.

- **Lot 1** = Bare land 2.52 acres / IDL appraised value $1,440,000
- **Lot 2** = Land with development (Stone House) 3.47 acres / IDL appraised value $985,000 (Land) – $680,000 (Stone House and associated infrastructure)
- **Lot 3** = Bare land 3.35 acres. IDL appraised value $1,100,000
- **Lot 4** = Bare land 1.93 acres. IDL appraised value $1,100,000
- **Lot 5** = Bare land 2.94 acres. IDL appraised value $1,010,000

The task force understands IDL will offer each parcel separately for auction, and then the entire island, in order to obtain the highest revenue result.

**“As is” Sale:** Each platted lot is non-conforming to current zoning rules and would become subject to overlapping governing authorities once transferred into private ownership. Any purchaser would obtain these lands “As Is” with no guarantees the required permits for infrastructure and development would be granted.

**Current Lessee:** After being vacant for several years, ten years ago an Idaho family purchased the house on Cougar Island and leased the land it is built upon (Lot 2). This family hopes to keep their home through the auction process and is cooperating with PLT to create a conservation easement over all the lots on the island to maintain it in its current condition into perpetuity.

**Appraisal:** United Payette has concerns about the methodology used in the appraisals, which UP has raised with IDL. The valuations were based on sales of island properties on Lake Pend Oreille or that have permanent power, on land wastewater disposal systems, and year-round access.

**Island Ecology:** The Island has observed yearly nesting of osprey, the return of the bald eagle, woodpecker, loon, and other waterfowl habitat. In addition to providing important habitat, the Island’s location in the middle of Payette Lake is integrally related to water quality in the entire watershed. United Payette has serious concerns about further development of this island because it has no utility infrastructure, questionable suitability for septic systems, and no permanent form of access, which could degrade water quality. Big Payette’s water quality is already under pressure. This was evidenced in 2021 by water hazard warnings issued by the Central District Health and Idaho Department of Environmental Quality for Big Payette Lake and downstream at Cascade Lake.
Recreation: Motorized and non-motorized boaters and shore gazers alike, locals and visitors, have enjoyed the serene, nearly unspoiled views of Cougar Island for generations. Families explore the undeveloped portions of the island creating lasting memories and appreciation for this natural gem. Fishers enjoy prime habitat for a sunrise or sunset catch.

Island Legacy: Cougar Island has been an important part of the landscape, shared among all members of the community. It is viewed as an iconic part of the area’s legacy. We now have the rare opportunity to ensure that it remains in the public domain for current and future generations.

Conservation Goal: United Payette’s broad coalition desires to conserve Cougar Island in its current state and preclude further development. After considering various options to protect the island, United Payette has partnered with Payette Land Trust and the current leaseholder to raise money to win the bid at auction and conserve the island. If successful, PLT would own the island except Lot 2, which would be purchased by the leaseholder. Together, PLT and the leaseholder would put into place a conservation easement covering the entire island that would restrict further development and maintain public access for the responsible community enjoyment of Cougar Island, today and into the future.

Fundraising: UP and Payette Land Trust (PLT) are organizing a fundraising strategy to collectively raise the necessary money to purchase the island. Due to the short time frame and amount needed, it is imperative that anyone desiring to conserve this iconic property contact UP or PLT promptly.

Cougar Island Fundraising Plan: The goal of the campaign to conserve Cougar is: $5,400,000 Support throughout the community at all levels will make our goal a reality. Leadership gifts will inspire the community to join in and prove our collective ability to fulfill this goal to conserve Cougar Island.

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*To support and assist the administration of these funds, we request that contributions at the level of $10,000 and under be made by donations to United Payette, and that giving levels above $10,000 be made by contribution or pledge to Payette Land Trust.

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