Auditor Joe Williams sees end soon to state land sales

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State Auditor Joe Williams revealed Wednesday an era in state land selling is soon coming to an end.

The energetic 77-year-old state officials who has served longer than any one else with 24 years, said the state land sales which have been an almost constant fixture in south Idaho, particularly in east Idaho, may be no more after next year.

The reason is simple: the state is running out of farmland to sell.

"We had many doubts this year we could sell more farmland at a good profit because of the slump in the economy but such is not the case," said Williams, who recently announced he is seeking his seventh four-year term.

Williams, in a Post-Register interview, said a land sale in Idaho Falls two weeks ago, was the test.

Joe Williams

There were eight tracts of land placed on sale to the highest bidder but at an appraised price which is the minimum the state will accept.

"That sale was a howling success and we plan to continue them despite the unfavorable economic conditions," said Williams. "We have discoveed that land had good value regardless of the economy."

Williams was at the sale at the Bonneville County Courthouse. All eight parcels of land totaling 1,782.24 were sold for $485,075, and two of them went far above the appraised price, one for $11,000 higher and another $4,000.

Steve Kelsey, appraiser for the State Land Department's east Idaho office in Idaho Falls, explained land appraisals are more scientific now than in earlier days. In the former years, an appraisal figure, often much too low, was set. The buyers really got bargains then but they still do. Now the land is more expertly appraised to more accurately reflect the current value.

"Our appraisals are now high," commented Williams. "Sometimes I think they are too high but they are done by men who know their business. Every penny the state gets goes to help the public schools."

Williams said the State Land Board has confined its sales mostly to farmland, although there has been some rangeland auctioned in past years.

Williams, at his Boise office, looked up figures and found out there are only 16,300 acres of state farmland remaining for sale.

Since Idaho assumed statehood in 1890, the state had sold nearly a million acres, said Williams. Remaining are about 2 million but they are mostly in timber, ranges and recreation land and will be retained by the state for public use.

Another activity also coming to a near termination are acquiring the federal land promised to the state at the time of statehood nearly 100 years ago. At that time, the federal government owed the state about 38,000 acres but nothing was done until the last decade.

In the last few years, the state moved to acquire its portion so that only 8,000 acres remain to be transferred. They remaining parcels may take a few years to transfer because of mineral values and other legal complications.

Oddly enough, when Cecil D. Andrus resigned his Idaho governorship to take over as secretary of interior in 1977 it was believed the land exchange would be speedily accomplished because it was something close to his heart. It didn't happen. Andrus was unable to make the land exchanges, mostly because President Carter and his henchmen were looking over his shoulders to see that Idaho got no preferred treatment. The Carter people also didn't want to see timber land transferred that would in any way become liable for industrial purposes.

Ironically, it was Secretary of Interior James Watt who slashed red tape and approved the transfer of some 10,000 acres this past year from the federal government to the state.

"Mr. Watt did a fine job for Idaho," commented Williams.

Williams said the state land sales have been a boom for public schools, bringing them millions of dollars yearly.

He glanced through his books and found the endowment fund now totals a whopping $200,000,145 in principle that the state doesn't touch.

"What we do is take the interest each year and it has been increasing in recent years," said Williams. "The principle stays as our permanent nestegg.

Last year, Williams said, the interest amounted to $19.3 million and it will increase gradually each year as the interest swells.

"All this interest money goes for the public schools," said Williams. "The high interest is making money for them."

Williams said the state has invested this endowment fund at about 10 percent.

Williams said the Idaho Falls land sales were so successful, he has scheduled others at Rexburg April 23 and at Blackfoot April 30.

"Not only do these land sales go into the endowment fund for the public schools, but the sold land goes on the tax rolls for each county and brings more revenue for local goverments," said Williams.

"This is one of the best businesses I've had the pleasure to perform while in office."

Williams apparently is well received because he is consistenly one of the leading vote getters on either ballot and often leads the ticket, along with two other political fixtures, Democratic Treasurer Marjorie Ruth Moon and Republican Secretary of State Pete T.Cenarrusa.