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OPINION

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IMPLEMENTING STATE INSURANCE EXCHANGE REQUIRES MOVING QUICKLY, CREATIVELY

*By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter and
Idaho Health Insurance Exchange Board Chairman Stephen Weeg*

The earnest debate that characterized the Idaho Legislature's March approval of legislation creating the Idaho Health Insurance Exchange has shifted to intense preparation for meeting a critical deadline in early October.

Since being appointed April 10 to shepherd the process according to the new state law, the Exchange Board's fast-track mission has been to create an online health insurance marketplace designed, driven and controlled by Idahoans to help our fellow citizens research and obtain affordable coverage that's right for them. The ambitious goal is to have the Internet marketplace ready by October for Idaho residents to begin enrolling to determine their eligibility for Medicaid or subsidies on insurance policies they can begin purchasing through the Exchange in January 2014.

By the time the initial enrollment period ends next April, the Exchange will be helping Idahoans meet their needs for health insurance and improved access to care. But here's the catch: The Obama administration will impose a federal exchange in Idaho unless we have ours operating by October. Meeting the deadline will require us to move quickly and act creatively.

We reject the idea of the federal government operating an exchange in Idaho, so the state Exchange Board has been working aggressively to navigate the complex requirements and meet the deadlines. The effort is driven by a unanimous commitment to maintaining state control, even if it means temporarily borrowing technology from the federal government.

The October deadline and our need to be fiscally responsible means using that existing technology effectively, efficiently and – we emphasize – temporarily as we develop and test each part of the exchange. It is a sensible, responsible first step to help ensure we do not default to a federal exchange while giving our vendors time to properly integrate the exchange components.

Once again – and despite misleading headlines and the drumbeat of those who oppose anything short of nullifying a federal law that’s already been found constitutional – our efforts will not result in a partnership or a federal exchange. Idaho is building and will have a consumer-friendly state-based exchange run by Idahoans for Idahoans.

We both have been impressed by the commitment of Exchange Board members. These Idahoans, your neighbors, have worked tirelessly since their appointment to achieve the goals expressed in the enabling legislation and to keep us on track for an Idaho-based exchange. We are confident they have the best interest of Idaho in mind and that they bring the necessary knowledge and skills to bear on making the Idaho Health Insurance Exchange work for you and a model for others to follow.

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