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Some things you might want to know about

The Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership Proposal

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What is the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership?

It is a collaboration of three conservation groups – the National Wildlife Federation, Montana Wilderness Association and Montana Trout Unlimited – and five Montana timber mills – Sun Mountain Lumber in Deer Lodge, R-Y Timber in Livingston and Townsend, Smurfit-Stone in Frenchtown, Pyramid Lumber in Seeley Lake and Roseburg Lumber Products in Missoula.

What is the Partnership proposing?

A different way of running Montana's largest national forest, the 3.3 million acre Beaverhead-Deerlodge. The Partnership proposes protection for 570,000 acres of the forest's roadless wildlands as federally designated wilderness; using stewardship contracting as the primary tool for vegetation management and restoration on the forest; and allowing stewardship logging and associated restoration on about 700,000 acres of the forest.

In what form is this proposal?

In April 2006, the Partners submitted to the Forest Service an alternative forest plan that they had negotiated over the previous three months. Among other things, it included the wilderness recommendations, the priority on stewardship contracting and restoration, and a 700,000-acre land-base on which stewardship projects would focus. The plan also included new standards for environmental protection that exceeded what the forest was proposing in the draft of its new 15-year plan, which has yet to be adopted after years of development. Today, it is clear the forest will not be adopting the Partnership's proposal, so most of the priority items in the proposal have been included in draft federal legislation that could be introduced in late 2007 in Congress.

Why did the Partnership form and negotiate a collaborative plan?

The conservation groups and industry partners agreed that the way the Forest Service currently manages national forests doesn't satisfactorily meet their respective interests. After a series of meetings, the partners realized they shared several things in common: 1.) A desire to see more active management, including restoration of damaged habitats, on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge, especially on the developed portions of the forest; 2.) agreement that the current system of using shrinking Congressional appropriations and a portion of timber sale receipts was not resulting in much significant activity; 3.) a desire to resolve the long-running dispute as to what roadless areas deserve formal protection as wilderness; 4.) a mutual feeling that keeping local mills running and providing work in the woods in environmentally responsible timber work is a good thing for Montana; and 5.) a strong belief that a new paradigm is needed to manage national forests, besides the long-standing one in which disputes over environmental and timber issues has paralyzed Forest Service managers to the point they rarely accomplish significant on-the-ground projects.

Okay, so what's in the proposed legislation and how will it work?

The bill would add 570,000 acres in 16 areas to the national wilderness system. It also creates 6 "Stewardship Landscapes" on the forest – the upper Clark Fork, Big Hole, Pioneers, Tobacco Roots, Highlands and Upper Rock Creek. In each of these large-scale landscapes, "eligible" stewardship areas have been delineated. The total areas eligible for stewardship projects is about 700,000 acres, about 22 percent of the forest. The Forest Service is directed to initiate large-landscape projects in these areas using stewardship contracting. Stewardship projects will be identified by the agency and a forest Resource Advisory Council (RAC), comprised of different interests. The RAC in turn appoints project-specific advisory teams, which will include interests from timber, conservation, recreation and grazing. The Forest Service and the public will then collaborate on selecting and designing projects, identifying what restoration needs can be accomplished within each project boundary, and what timber can be cut in an environmentally compatible fashion to fund restoration. Stewardship contracting, as opposed to standard timber sale contracts, trades value of the trees for restoration services on-site. The bill also requires that 1.) no new roads be added to the forest; 2.) any roads used in the project be temporary; 3.) at the end of the project road densities in the project area not exceed 1.5 miles per square-mile; 4.) scientifically developed riparian protections known as "INFISH" standards be required; and 5.) landscapes with high road densities, large insect infestations or which are part of the wildland-urban interface be the primary focus of projects inside the eligible lands.

The bill also directs the forest to generate at least one large-scale project a year – up to 50,000 acres in size -- and to mechanically treat (with some follow-up prescribed burning) 14,000 acres in the first two years and 70,000 acres after 10 years.

But, aren't the mechanical treatment directives excessive and similar to a "guaranteed cut" for the timber industry?

Only if you consider timber activities on 70,000 acres of a 3.3 million acre forest over 10 years excessive. For comparison, the preferred alternative the forest has developed considers 216,000 acres of the forest commercial timberland, and another 1.2 million open to cutting for other purposes, such as fire salvage or to remove dead and dying trees. Further, the Partnership legislation offers no guaranteed board-foot cut level. There is only a guarantee that a certain amount of acres can see some logging, but only within projects that require far more public involvement than currently.

Okay, contrast for me the difference between what the forest proposes for logging and what the Partnership is proposing.

The forest wants discretion to log on 1.5 million acres. The Partnership proposes that harvest be held to a potential 700,000 acres, but that 70,000 acres see some logging over 10 years. Unlike the agency proposal, the partnership requires the use of stewardship contracts which reverts the timber value into restoration services. Further, the Partnership proposes that harvest also reduce road densities, protect riparian areas and not include new permanent roads.

Tell me more about restoration activities.

Restoration could include reclaiming sediment-bleeding roads, pulling road culverts that block fish movement, reducing road densities to provide more security for big game, weed control on important range lands, instream habitat improvements for trout, improvements in campgrounds or trails, burning that benefits wildlife, fencing cattle out of streamside areas, reclamation of abandoned mines, or any other activity that helps rectify existing human-caused impacts. Timber activities that some consider restoration include thinning that allows burning so that timber stands more mimic a fire-maintained stand, cutting and slashing that invigorates aspen stands, or creating openings in bug-infested stands.

I've noticed some of the boundaries of some "eligible" stewardship lands include inventoried roadless acres. Isn't this a problem?

True, the boundaries of the areas eligible for stewardship activities include some inventoried roadless areas. However, there is no requirement in the legislation that harvest occur in these areas. Further, most acres are comprised of slivers adjacent to existing roads. Boundaries have not been drawn into core areas or next to critical streams. In addition, despite being classified as "roadless," some do have roads in them. Stewardship activities might allow for "de-roading" roadless areas. Nothing in this legislation is inconsistent with the way these areas are currently treated under the roadless rules that have been adopted for the Forest Service. Finally, both the conservation and timber partners agree roadless areas will not be priorities for stewardship projects.

So, from a conservation standpoint, why is the Partnership's proposal better than what the Forest Service proposes, which is the only other proposal out there?

The agency proposes no new ways to fund restoration. And thus the forest's huge and sediment-bleeding road system will continue harming water quality, fish and wildlife. In addition, the forest recommends much less wilderness protection for roadless areas – without a legislative vehicle to accomplish this task. In fact, as long as deserving roadless areas don't have permanent wilderness protection, motorized use, much of it sanctioned by the Forest Service, will continue to expand within these wild areas. This makes it nearly impossible politically to get wilderness protection in the future. The Partnership proposal also requires standards for the forest road system that are environmentally superior to the agency's. Finally, any forest plan allocation or standard not included in the Partnership's legislation, will default to the forest plan, which does include some beneficial ideas for fish and wildlife.

How does the Partnership proposal address motorized use?

Only indirectly, but in favor of conservation. Reductions of road densities after the completion of stewardship projects will reduce opportunities for motorized damage – probably the number one management problem on this forest. Further, creation of 570,000 acres of wilderness will put those areas off-limits to motorized use. Motorized use on the rest of the forest will still be subject to allocation and limits created in the final forest plan and landscape-specific travel plans.

Who supports the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership's proposals?

A number of interests have either endorsed the original plan from which the legislation was crafted, or the supported the unique approach the Partnership has employed. They include five of seven county commissions that govern land on or around the forest, Gov. Schweitzer, Senators Baucus and Tester, Secretary of State Brad Johnson, Attorney General Mike McGrath, labor leaders, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Clark Fork Coalition, Montana Wildlife Federation, and others. The Partnership has received editorial support from a number of daily newspapers in Montana.

Who opposes the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership?

Extremist state-wide groups that represent motorized users have attacked the original proposal and all ideas for legislation. A few environmental groups, such as the Alliance for the Wild Rockies and WildWest Institute, have joined the motorized interests in providing heated opposition. Plum Creek Timber Company also appears to oppose the Partnership's ideas. The county commissions in Madison and Beaverhead Counties have opposed the Partnership, though ongoing discussions indicate they might back off some.

For more information, go to www.b-dpartnership.org.