



Timber, conservation groups reach deal on Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest plan

*By PERRY BACKUS of the Missoulian
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DEER LODGE - Saying they're tired of the decades of fighting that's stalled everything from timber sales to new wilderness designations, a group of timber industry leaders and conservationists on Monday unveiled their vision for the future management of Montana's largest national forest.

The accord - which they negotiated over the past four months - would create a stable supply of timber for local mills, set aside additional acreage for recommended wilderness and help fund projects that would benefit wildlife and fisheries on the 3.3-million-acre Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

The plan calls for setting aside 573,000 acres for proposed wilderness and designating 713,000 acres of land as suitable timber base. Both figures mark substantial increases over what's now proposed in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge draft land use plan.

Members of three different conservation groups and two representatives of Montana's timber industry called the plan a "balanced proposal" that would protect both the resource and local economies at a press conference held at Sun Mountain Lumber in Deer Lodge.

"It's encouraging that everyone involved in this partnership agrees that we need to work together to put an end to the gridlock that exists today on forest lands," said Sherm Anderson, president and owner of Sun Mountain Lumber. "This proposal is an entirely new approach to managing the forest lands that we feel will have a wide range of appeal and support from other groups."

Under the proposal, timber sales would be sold under a stewardship contract, which allows for profits from the sale to be retained by the forest - and to pay for other kinds of work, including reforestation projects, fish habitat improvements or trail maintenance.

Faced with dwindling budgets, the Forest Service often doesn't have the kind of money it needs to address issues like undersized culverts or miles of poorly maintained roads.

"Whenever a forest burns, we have a road network that bleeds sediment," said Bruce Farling, Montana Trout Unlimited's executive director. "Its damage to the fishery is significant. This is a way to help fix that."

"Keeping the money raised from timber sales will also benefit local economies," said Tom France of the National Wildlife Federation.

“There's a tremendous advantage for Montana and our national forests to keep those monies here,” France said. “There will be jobs created - and a lot of work finished that's not getting done now.”

The groups plan to present their proposal to the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, which is in the process of updating its management plan.

The draft plan was released last summer. The comment period ended in October. Forest Service officials said the agency doesn't have the funding to reopen the comment period.

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest spokesman Jack de Golia said the agency will take a look at the proposal and decide how it might fit with the different alternatives already considered in the draft.

“We need to sort it out,” de Golia said. “We're glad the groups were able to get together and come up with something.”

The accord will likely change as other interests weigh in.

“By far, this isn't the final product,” said Tim Baker, Montana Wilderness Association executive director. “While we don't foresee any major changes, there's always room for tweaking here and there.”

Over the next few weeks, members of the different groups will spread out to talk with county commissioners, off-highway vehicle groups and other environmental organizations to try to drum up support.

From the Beaverhead County commission's initial response, they have their work cut out for them.

“I don't see how we can support it all as it's written,” said Beaverhead Commissioner Mike McGinley.

Commissioner Garth Haugland said the commission felt as though it was “set-up” by both the Montana Wilderness Association and the timber industry.

“They sort of upped the ante by going public,” Haugland said. “The whole process somewhat stunned us - maybe tomorrow we'll be cheering them on, but this hit us cold and now we've got to circle the wagons and reassemble.”

The clock is ticking for Montana's timber industry. Without a stable supply of timber from Forest Service lands, some of the mills in Montana won't be able to survive, said Ed Regan of RY Timber.

“The industry is at a threshold and if within the next couple of years the supply doesn't improve from Forest Service lands, there probably won't be a lot of mills left in Montana,” Regan said.

The Forest Service controls 69 percent of the timberlands suitable for harvest, Sun Mountain Lumber's Anderson said. The nine national forests in Montana grow an estimated billion board feet of timber annually. Another 500 million board feet die each year, he said.

“We're harvesting 118 to 200 million board feet annually,” Anderson said. “That's not even 10 percent.”

Under terms of the accord, the industry would harvest about 7,000 acres a year or about 1 percent of the 713,000 acres of the suitable timber base on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge, Anderson said.

Anderson said it wasn't hard to find common ground with the mainstream conservation groups.

“The things that are important to the National Wildlife Federation or Trout Unlimited are also important to me and a lot of other folks who make their living from the forest,” Anderson said. “We like to recreate and fish there too. We don't want to see those values destroyed either.”

The National Wildlife Federation's France said he expects a lively discussion with other conservation and environmental groups about the accord.

“There's just some things in the proposal that are so powerful,” France said. “This is the first wilderness proposal in a generation. I think that's incredibly important to conservationists.

“The stewardship projects will enhance fisheries and wildlife habitat - something that all Montanans care about. I'm optimistic that when we start the conversation that we'll get productive responses.”

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