



## Innovation in Conservation

[KUFM editorial 4/27/06]

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Eight years ago I returned to Montana after spending almost 30 years working in other states. When I returned, I was immediately reminded of something I'd loved about Montana that I'd forgotten. I'd forgotten how civil and respectful Montanans were to each other. In Montana, strangers on the street meet your eye and smile, drivers waive and stop for pedestrians, and differences of opinion didn't devolve into shouting matches or worse. The general civility of life in Montana, however, did not then extend to disagreements over natural resource allocation decisions—and still don't. These disagreements remain as contentious and acrimonious as they were 30 years ago. This is not surprising because different groups feel passionately that Montana's natural resources are either there to support a high quality of life or, alternatively, that they are best used and viewed as an engine to produce jobs in industries like forest products or mining on which some Montanans depend.

Economists who comment frequently on KUFM have long recognized that this is a false equation. Properly structured, Montana's wealth of natural resources can provide both important resource extraction jobs without significant deterioration of Montana's legendary beauty, abundance of wildlife, and quality of life that is so important to our future. The key is to find the proper structure that will create balanced win-win solutions for all interests. When this structure can be found, it is like the "sweet spot" of a baseball bat or tennis racket. In public policy issues, when this sweet spot is found, civility can flourish instead of the toxic weeds of confrontation and acrimony.

On Monday, a coalition of conservation groups and timber interests announced that they'd found such a sweet spot for the future management of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest in southwestern Montana. The conservation groups include Montana Trout Unlimited, the Montana Wilderness Association, and the National Wildlife Federation. Timber interests joining them are Sun Mountain Lumber, Pyramid Mountain Lumber, Smurfit-Stone, R-Y Lumber, and Roseburg Forest Products. These groups negotiated for four months to come up with an agreement that would provide key environmental protections and also a supply of timber that would be adequate to keep the timber industry jobs from disappearing and prevent local communities from becoming ghost towns.

The agreement would increase acres potentially available for timber harvest to 713,000 acres or about 22% of the forest. Only about 7,000 acres or 1% of this would be available for harvest in any year. More significant, however, is that the timber would be harvested under forest stewardship contracts that the

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Forest Service has been experimenting with in recent years. Profits from these contracts are retained and used locally. I worked as a member on the monitoring committee for the Clearwater stewardship project on the Flathead National Forest and saw first-hand the benefits that accrued to the environment from this way of doing business: existing roads were closed and restored to natural conditions; new roads built to extract timber were closed and restored; culverts and bridges were reconstructed to enhance fish passage and reduce sedimentation; weeds were controlled; pit toilets were installed in campgrounds; and threats from fire and insect infestation were reduced. The bottom line was that the forest was in better shape, from all perspectives, after the logging occurred under the stewardship contract than it was before. Also, money and jobs were maintained in the local community—in this instance Seely Lake. Perhaps most significantly, this Flathead project demonstrated that when conservation interests, timber interests, and the Forest Service work together in good faith, win-win outcomes can be achieved. Such outcomes provide a basis on which future collaborative efforts with similar positive results can be built.

From my perspective as a wildlife biologist, one of the most attractive components of the Beaverhead proposal was the agreement by the collaborators to work together to establish 573,000 acres of designated wilderness in 16 units on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest. These wilderness areas will provide the key stepping stones of secure habitat that will connect the Yellowstone Ecosystem with the Bob Marshall to the north and with the Selway-Bitterroots to the west. The support of the timber industry and conservation community should be enough to get these wilderness areas through Congress. Certainly, nobody has had any success in recent decades in establishing wilderness areas through the old confrontational model. A collaboration model, on the other hand, might be what is needed to get new wilderness areas established in Montana.

The organizations that negotiated this agreement recognize that getting it implemented won't be a cakewalk. Perhaps the biggest obstacle will be convincing the Forest Service to adopt a bold vision for the Beaverhead-Deerlodge. The Forest Service is beset by many problems and has been reluctant to take on new challenges. Getting the Forest Service to adopt the recommendations of the Beaverhead partnership will likely require heavy lifting at the local, state and national levels. There are also some environmentalists who have already spoken out against the proposal.

However, if we, as Montana citizens, can find the courage and wisdom to try cooperation instead of confrontation regarding natural resource issues, the civility that so characterizes Montanans in other areas of our every day lives can be expanded to reduce the poisonous atmosphere that now surrounds these decisions. Wouldn't that be nice?

This is Sterling Miller for the National Wildlife Federation in Missoula, Montana

