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The Problems with the Beaverhead Deerlodge Partnership

The Beaverhead Deerlodge Partnership (BDP) collaborative agreement with the timber industry, ORVers, and other groups that are involved in destructive land use practices is being endorsed by the MWA, TU and NWF. I realize this is a good faith effort by these organizations to garner more wildlands protection in Montana, however, this proposal has no economic, ecological or ethical justifications.

As little as two years ago MWA President Gerry Jennings wrote in the MWA newsletter "the goal of the MWA was to *designate all roadless areas* in Montana as wilderness and to *defend the natural integrity of Montana's public wildands.*" What happened to those goals?

There are many good features to the BDP. Among the better elements are a ban on construction of new permanent roads (though temporary roads will be permitted—more on that later), a net decrease in road mileage at the end of the planning period, and of course the proposed designation of more than 570,000 acres of new wilderness.

However, the chief flaw I see in the BDP is the assumption that we (humans) are smart enough and know enough about the ecology of this area to “manage” it and “restore” it. One of the chief goals of the BDP is sustaining the economic viability of the timber industry. As long as this is one of the major goals of the plan (and it is stated as such), even good faith efforts to manage the forest for ecological restoration will be fatally flawed and under pressure to get the cut out. That any conservation group would join forest exploitative industries in perpetuating and endorsing that idea is the heart of the BDP problem.

The BDP agreement supports a tripling of logging over even what even the FS is proposing in its forest plan and agreeing to allow up to 200,000 roadless lands to be entered for "stewardship" forestry. The assurances by BDP that this logging proposal is “sustainable” are based more upon economic rather than biological criteria.—more on that later. Indeed, it is more about maintaining a steady supply of logs for the mill—not ensuring long term stability for the land. The BDNF is not the woodbox for the Nation—but it contains some the finest depository of wildlands and wildlife habitat left in the nation.

You can grow a ten inch pine quite easily in on flat land with high precipitation in a place like Georgia but you can't produce trophy trout, grizzly bears, or wolverine in a Georgia tree plantation. So why are conservation groups supporting turning our public roadless lands into tree plantation for the benefit of private industry?

How can these groups be advocates for the Roadless Rule and roadless lands if they are willing to sell out the lower and biologically important roadless lands on the BDNF to development? All along we have been hearing about how essential (not

superfluous) these last roadless lands are for wildlife, fisheries, etc. and now these groups (MWA, NWF, and TU) are willing to let more than 200,000 acres be developed? Did these roadless lands suddenly lose all the above values?

Equally disturbing to me is the fact that these groups apparently endorse access of up to 1.6 million acres of the forest by ORVs, while snowmobiles will be allowed on 2.2 million acres. Where is the defense of “Homeland Health” our collective heritage to have our public lands maintained in an ecologically healthy condition? Show me how ORV use does anything but degrade these lands. How can any group that calls itself a conservation organization condone that kind of abuse of our public heritage?

REAL ACRES ON THE GROUND

In exchange for supporting these destructive uses on our public lands, these hopes to garner support from the timber industry for approximately 570,000 acres of new wilderness areas. I don't want to make light of 570,000 acres. That's a nice chunk of country, but further examination of the acreage in this proposals shows that the bulk of the acres that will be “protected” are not threatened by any resource development what so ever. A lot of the acreage is “rocks and ice.”

I am not just talking theoretically. I have visited nearly all of the proposed new wilderness areas, so I also know from my on the ground experience that much of the acreage in the 570,000 plus areas proposed for wilderness designation are largely alpine/subalpine country with almost no commercial timber value. In other words, they are not threatened by logging. If you look at the maps on the ERG web site you'll find that much of the forest that is considered suitable (by the FS own exaggerated definition of suitable timber base) for logging is excluded from any wilderness proposal. Indeed, in the BDP press materials goes out of its way to state that the largest proposed wilderness areas like the West Big Hole and East Pioneers leave out the lower elevation forested terrain.

Most of the acreage proposed for wilderness are--for the most part-- self protected. They are steep and rugged making them picturesque but not really suitable for resource development (or even ORVs for the most part), while most of the lands that will be given up are more gentle, heavily forested, lower elevation hence more productive—and genuinely threatened by logging, ORVs, and other resource extraction. In my view what we are gaining in “designated wilderness” may not be worth what we are giving up.

LOGGING ON THE BDNF IS NOT ECONOMICAL OR ECOLOGICAL

Regardless of what you may or may not think about the desirability of achieving wilderness designation for these areas, one thing is certain, logging this forest is ecologically and ethnically wrong. The BDNF is high, dry, cold, steep country that even a generous person would not characterize as a tree factory. Most people recognize that some trees will be cut someplace. What we question is whether the Beaverhead Deerlodge National Forest is the appropriate place for any commercial timber production. The forests on the BDNF grow slowly and trees are small. It's questionable whether

logging—if all costs were considered—can be done economically (and ecologically) anywhere on the BDNF. Only by ignoring most of the real costs can anyone assert that it makes any economic sense to log here. Such narrow interpretations of “costs” should not be what the MWA, NWF, and TU should be promoting. Indeed, they should be in the forefront of demanding a full accounting of ALL COSTS associated with logging.

The chief values found on this forest are clean water, fisheries, wildlife and wilderness. Every tree cut down is taking away from the real value of the forest—not contributing to anything positive except the coffers of timber companies. These conservation groups should be making that assertion over and over again.

IMPACTS FROM LOGGING IGNORED

There are other impacts (costs) from logging that are being quietly ignored by MWA, TU and NWF and/or are overly optimistic about the ability of the FS to mitigate. The BDP calls for logging to occur on an average of 7,000 acres a year or 70,000 every decade. This is not an insignificant amount of disturbance. However, the ecological effects will be magnified because they will be focused on the lower, most productive sites on the forest. Trying to minimize the effects by suggesting that only logging will only occur on 1% of the 713,000 acres available for logging annually is like the Bush administration suggesting that oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is ok because only 2000 acres will be impacted. However, as with oil development on the Arctic Refuge, the negative impacts associated with logging will affect an area well beyond the acreage directly affected by active logging practices. For instance, elk tend to avoid roads by up to a mile, and bears have been shown to avoid areas actively logged for years after logging has ceased.

This logging will remove the biological legacy of dead snags and down woody debris. This biological legacy is extremely important to the growth of future forests and to sustain other wildlife from voles to cavity nesting birds. Dead logs in the soil also help to increase soil fertility and water holding capacity--something that is critical on the BDNF given its overall aridity and low productivity. Logs that fall into streams provide much of the fish habitat on smaller streams. Other forest dependent resources that logging will disrupt or harm include genetic diversity, soils, natural processes like forest fire, clean water which fisheries depend upon. The list goes on and on.

The “feel good” statement that there will only be “temporary” roads is a bunch of industry hype. First of all completely restoring roads is extremely expensive, and should include recontouring slopes, revegetating the land, and reestablishing drainage patterns. Though the BDP calls for recontouring and removal of culverts, etc. a complete restoration is not what is being proposed for the BDNF. Roads are a problem. For more on roads see Trombulak, SC, and CA Frissell. 2000. Review of ecological effects of roads on terrestrial and aquatic communities. **Conservation Biology** 14: 18–30.

. But to highlight just a few things that MWA, TU and NWF are glossing over I will mention that logging roads (temporary or otherwise) disrupt natural water drainage and increases sedimentation in waterways that will harm fisheries and water quality.

Roads become vectors for weeds and diseases.

Even closed roads are used by people. Hunters still walk or ride horses on “closed” roads. This reduces security for wildlife and could lead to shortened hunting seasons, and certainly make these areas less secure for many species that depend on limited human access like grizzly bear and wolverine.

Plus it's shown over and over again that if you put in a road these are "captured" by ORVs--whether you designate them temporary or not--these will become permanent ORV access sites. I am surprised that any conservation organization would support or feel reassured by statements such as offered in the plan like “ Stewardship projects shall incorporate project design and legal closures to assure that timber harvest areas or closed skid trails and roads are not used by off-road vehicles.” Come on, this has never been successfully anywhere. If you create roads, they will become part of the ORV trail system without strict law enforcement. Where are the dedicated funds for law enforcement?

Logging equipment compacts soils.

Logging activity introduces human activity into the forest that can affect sensitive wildlife, driving them away from what would otherwise be good habitat.

Finally who is going to pay for the monitoring that will ensure that the environmental safeguards outlined in the agreement are in fact maintained? The FS has a dismal track record in enforcing environmental standards for logging, grazing or other exploitative uses. There are few “measurable” standards in the BDP agreement nor consequences if environmental degradation occurs. And the burden of proof is not on the timber industry to show they are having no impacts, rather the burden for demonstrating adverse affects will fall upon environmental watch dog groups already overburden with trying to keep the FS honest.

The rationale given by these conservation organizations to support this expanded timber program is suspect as well. Suggesting that the best way to repair past logging damage is selling trees to the timber industry to fund "restoration" projects is like building casinos to fund gambling rehabilitation programs. We are better off letting nature do the restoration than entering in a Faustian bargain with the timber industry to fund repair of the damage they created in the first place.

Allowing the Forest Service to keep all receipts from Forest Stewardship Programs can create an incentive for more logging. In order to fund other FS programs, the agency will be tempted to enter into expanded logging programs.

ASSUMPTION THAT LARGE BLAZES ARE BAD

Throughout the document there are assertions such as “some drainages could experience large and intense burns due to the aging of forests and accumulation of fuels from fire exclusion” and other similar statements that imply that large blazes are somehow undesirable or even bad.

Large blazes are the “norm” if you look beyond a short temporal scale and special scale. The assumption that large blazes are outside the “historic range of variability” is increasingly being questioned for all ecosystems—including lower elevation forests, but is almost certainly not outside of the norm for higher elevation forests.

LOGGING CAN'T STOP BIG FIRES IN LODGEPOLE ECOSYSTEMS

Another “feel good” statement by partnership members supporting this agreement is that it suggests that logging can prevent large blazes. For instance the plan states “it is scientifically based, and responds to challenges posed by unnaturally high fire risk, robust outbreaks of forest insect infestations...” “

This is the “pseudo science” of logging companies, not something that I would expect from any conservation group.

This is totally unsupported by the science for these kinds of ecosystems. First of all most of the BDNF is not challenged by “unnaturally high fire risk” and any ecologist will tell you that “outbreaks of forest insects infestations” are natural and have an overall positive effect upon forest ecosystems. They are only “infestations” if you care about logging trees.

Yet the BDP is advocating “thinning” on the assumption that these forest are somehow out of historic range of variability. About the only landscapes that “may” be out of historic range of variability are the very low elevation ponderosa pine forests of the West—and there is virtually none of this kind of forest on the BDNF.

Most the BDNF is dominated by lodgepole pine forests that tend to burn in stand replacement episodic blazes. Logging--short of totally removing all trees over a huge area—can not and will not affect the spread and extent of these fires as we learned in Yellowstone in 1988 where even clearcut lands readily burned.

Also there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that thinning on a landscape scale cannot and does not stop large blazes. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest opening up the forest to more wind, and more sun can increase fire severity and spread. At the very least, the science on this issue is mixed. Basing forest policy upon unproven techniques that will affect such a large area is questionable.

Furthermore, I question whether it's desirable to promote logging and use tax dollars to protect from fire private development that may be amongst the public lands. This is like saying we should support levies on the river because people are stupid enough to build houses in the flood plain. If anyone should be pointing out how it's inappropriate to build homes in the forest--it should be the conservation community. Instead these groups are in effect signing on to a management prescription that will exacerbate this problem by creating tax payer subsidized fuel reductions and fire fighting that only encourages more sprawl and irresponsible development.

LOGGING DESTROYS RURAL ECONOMIES

The BDP makes a point about wanting to promote rural economies. However, in promoting timber cutting on the BDNF, the BDP is actually hurting the rural economy of this region--not promoting it. The expansion of logging will degrade the very amenities that are driving Montana's rural economies at present--i.e fisheries, wildlife, water, scenery, and wild country that are the most valuable resources of this forest. Numerous economic studies bear this out. Having any timber harvest on the BDNF is a classic case of the misallocation of scarce resources. That conservation groups would quietly support the notion that it's both possible and desirable to support rural economies through logging of public resources is to ignore all recent economic research.

In addition, job creation in the timber industry continues to shrink due to automation, so any jobs that result from this massive increase in cutting will be off set by continued automation. In other words, this proposal will be hurting rural economies by fostering a dependency on an industry with declining employment opportunities.

Every tree is far more valuable remaining alive or dead on the mountain than being cut into a 2 x 4. Many people with retirement or other funds choose to live in places like the communities that are found near the BDNF precisely because of its values like wild country. Undeveloped lands are the real economic engines for western Montana--and they are what sustain the rural economies, not logging.

NOTHING ABOUT GRAZING

The plan recognizes that key watersheds have been severely degraded threatening many fish including the bull trout, grayling and cutthroat trout. Some of this degradation is the direct result of past logging and roading. There is no doubt that road removal and other proposals in the plan will help aquatic ecosystems. However, the majority of the damage to riparian habitat and watersheds on the BDNF is the result of livestock grazing. Unfortunately nowhere in the document is livestock grazing even mentioned, except to note that it can continue in wilderness areas (presumably allowing livestock to continue to degrade watersheds in wilderness is OK with these groups) Trying to restore watersheds on the BDNF without addressing livestock grazing is like Congress trying to balance the budget while ignoring the Iraq War costs. It's the elephant in the room that no one wants to mention.

THRILLCRAFT USE IS LEGALIZED

The BDP legitimizes the degradation of our public lands by supporting ORV use on over 1.6 million acres of the BDNF and snowmobile use on more than 2.2 million acres. There is no way to responsibly use ORVs without damage. The only places you can drive an ORV without damaging the land is on a regular road. Any off road travel has unavoidable impacts to public values. Thus advocating that ORV use is OK on some lands is

essentially condoning the degradation and vandalism of our public lands. Such a position puts any conservation group in an untenable position. How can one effectively argue that ORVs degrade or destroy some lands, but it's OK for them to degrade or destroy other public lands?

I want the MWA, TU, NWF) to be an advocate for wilderness and wildness. Let the politicians and the FS, etc. make the compromises--that's their job. The job of conservationists is to advocate for wilderness. It shouldn't be making deals that permits, ignores, or as in some parts of this agreement even advocates destructive land uses on our public lands.

George Wuerthner
Center for Biodiversity
Richmond Vermont