

Breaking Free of Forest Service Gridlock

By Ed Regan and Tim Baker

When it comes to Montana national forests, Montanans want results, not just more of the old arguments. For many years now, the people of Montana have looked for solutions from the timber industry and conservation community.

That's why, almost one year ago, a historic alliance of timber companies and Montana conservationists presented to the public a "made-in-Montana" vision for managing public lands on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

The resulting Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest Partnership rests on three pillars: jobs in the woods, healthy forests, and protection of our Montana backcountry heritage. The conservation and timber partners* are committed to a working forest that puts logs on the trucks and keeps the mills running, and ensures that world-class fishing, hunting, and recreational opportunities are present for future generations.

The Partnership is about compromise and common ground. As long-time adversaries, we have come together to find real solutions that move us past the gridlock in forest management that has existed for too long.

The timber partners have agreed to support additional areas for wilderness designation, and the conservation partners have agreed to support stewardship projects, including logging and other restoration, across a large portion of the forest, including roadless areas. These were very tough decisions, and both sides of the Partnership have been criticized by their respective friends and allies.

However, we were brought together by the realization that 25 years of gridlock had not only prevented solutions to pressing needs relating to forest management and restoration, but had risked creating a Forest Service unable to effectively manage the forest.

Our vision was simple: look across the entire landscape, while focusing on specific activities for specific places. The agreement is possible because the Partners see a big picture – we recognize that "forest management" means taking care of the whole – not just focusing on one part. Our notion of "stewardship" not only includes places for sustainable timber harvest, but also restoring places where the land

and water are damaged and recognizing that some places are best off left alone, as wilderness.

The costs of forest management gridlock have been tremendous for all of us: mill closures, loss of jobs, and economic hardship in local communities; bark beetle infestations and associated fire risk; a legacy of impaired streams and wildlife habitat; and, treasured beautiful and pristine places that lack the protection they deserve.

The Partnership has real payoffs for people. It means jobs for Montanans, healthier forests and reduced fire risk, improved fisheries and wildlife habitat, and protection for our backcountry hunting, horsepacking, hiking, and other Montana outdoor traditions.

Resolving the gridlock in forest management won't be easy. Issues like wilderness, logging, and motorized use on public lands have been flashpoints for many years. Ultimately, legislation by Congress will be necessary to provide a measure of certainty for all interests, and the Partnership has prepared a draft working document to foster further discussion. If this Partnership proves successful, maybe it can serve as a model for other National Forests.

Over the last year we've talked to other Montanans about our efforts, building support for what we're doing, and modifying our proposal to reflect these constructive discussions. We are still talking with others and we stand ready to make further adjustments as we learn more.

Our partnership has its critics --- some of whom we look forward to working with.

Others still want everything their way – whether it's no logging, riding ATVs or snowmobiles everywhere, all wilderness, or no wilderness. But we realize that kind of thinking gave us the gridlock we're in today!

The Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest Partnership is a breath of fresh air. It's about solutions. We want to move forward, beyond the stalemate of the past, and set a path toward a better future.

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**The Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest Partnership includes Sun Mountain Lumber, Montana Wilderness Association, R-Y Timber, Montana Trout Unlimited, Pyramid Mountain Lumber, National Wildlife Federation, Roseburg Forest Products, and Smurfit-Stone Container.*