

Sunday Opinion

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MISSOULIAN EDITORIAL

A model for compromise on Beaverhead-Deerlodge forest

SUMMARY:

Groups worked together to craft a proposal all could agree on. Now it should be passed.

Two years ago, representatives from several timber companies and conservation groups got together to talk about the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. Some agreed to meet because there were concerns about the U.S. Forest Service's proposal to reduce the number of acres available for harvest in Montana's largest national forest. Others were worried about the lack of environmental protections in the Forest Service plan.

Before long, they managed to hammer out a plan that almost anyone could agree to — one that called both for more logging and more designated wilderness, as well as stronger restoration efforts and better long-term protections from wildfires. Ultimately, the plan

stood to benefit not only the timber companies and conservationists but also the public at large, who would gain healthier forests and wildlife, cleaner air and water, more wilderness and more accessible recreational areas.

Unfortunately, the proposal arrived late in the planning process and has yet to be implemented. Even so, the group that came up with it is now hoping Montana's congressional delegates will introduce legislation to make their innovative approach a model for federal land management while mixing logging, conservation, environmental and timber interests to the benefit of all on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

We would like to join them

in urging our delegates to escort the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Conservation, Restoration and Stewardship Act successfully through Congress, because the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership is an idea worth repeating.

The partnership consists of three environmental organizations and five wood products companies: the National Wildlife Federation, Montana Wilderness Association and Montana Trout Unlimited, 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. Their strategy includes designating more than 700,000

acres for logging and nearly 575,000 for wilderness out of the 3.3 million acres in southwest Montana, and would also require stricter environmental standards than what's currently being proposed by the Forest Service.

And it has received widespread support from a variety of interests, who seem to appreciate the group's determination to include every possible perspective.

Not everyone, of course, is on board. Some off-roaders feel their vehicles would be excluded from too many acres. Some conservationists feel the wilderness designation includes too few acres. And Beaverhead and Madison counties are concerned about giving up too much local control. We hope they, too, will try to see past

their ideological differences and devote their efforts to the areas in which their interests meet.

For too long the discussion about our national forests has been like two groups standing on opposite ends of a room shouting at each other. Any proposal that encourages them to belly up to the table would be worth taking a close look at, but the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership goes a step further: It actually gets those groups to shake hands.

The result of their cooperation is a land management plan that has something for everyone, but is especially beneficial for the people these forests belong to — us. And that's why our congressional delegates should support it.