

Conservation Groups and Timber Companies Collaborate

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By Emily Darrell, 11-16-07

Collaboration between three conservation groups and five major timber companies has produced a plan for the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, Montana's largest, that would allow for both increased logging and expanded wilderness areas.

Tom France, director of the National Wildlife Federation's Northern Rockies region, and Bob Boschee, general manager for Missoula's Smurfit-Stone pulp and paper mill, spoke at a Friday meeting of City Club Missoula about their involvement in the drafting of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership bill.

"We have such a big common interest," Boschee said of conservationists and the timber industry. "The differences we have are not that significant." Sustainable forest health, Boschee said, is a primary objective for both groups.

The six main points of the partnership, as outlined by France, are as follows:

- making about 700,000 acres eligible for timber harvesting,
- high logging standards, including a ban on building permanent roads,
- an exclusive use of stewardship contracting that would all the Forest Service to keep the revenue generated from logging and use it for forest stewardship,
- about 560,000 new acres of designated wilderness,
- lower National Environmental Protection Act operating costs, and
- designated areas for motorized recreation.

In October a draft of this proposal was submitted to Sens. Baucus and Tester and Congressmen Denny Rehberg. France said it has received a warm reception.

"Conversations are certainly moving forward and moving forward positively," France said.

Boschee said that reduction of timber harvesting on Forest Service land is the main reason for the major decline of the logging industry in the last couple of decades, and thus the need for innovative partnerships.

"Private lands have been the primary source of timber in the last 10 years," Boschee said. "If it wasn't for Plum Creek and other private holders we wouldn't have been able to survive."

France then gave some figures to back up Boschee's claim. In 1960, 14 billion board feet of timber was taken from Forest Service land. In 2000, this figure was two billion board feet.

In an interview following the City Club meeting, Ed Nesselroad, the director of public and governmental relations for the Forest Service's Northern Region, said, "We think the energy represented by these diverse interests coming together is very positive," adding that the concept of stewardship contracting is one that the Forest Service fully supports.

"Stewardship contracting is more of a barter approach than a traditional timber sale," Nesselroad said. Timber companies, while paying less for logging rights, are held responsible for such projects as stream restoration and campsite maintenance.

But while the plan has received much support from a diverse group of interests, as France said, it has received its share of criticism. "Motorized recreation has been a very tough group to work with," he said. "Some environmental groups have been

pretty critical because they don't trust the timber industry or the Forest Service."

Some objection has also come from two counties, Beaverhead and Madison, in the southern end of the Forest. These two counties, in contrast to other areas of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge, are more economically dependent upon ranching than logging, France said.

Michael J. McGinley, a Beaverhead County Commissioner, said in a telephone interview that the interests of motorized recreationists and ranchers in his community, and to a lesser degree horseback riders and mountain bikers, have been largely ignored by the Partnership.

"They haven't incorporated our comments into the partnership plan," McGinley said. But Nesselroad, for one, acknowledges their objections, and said: "This is a group we have to take seriously."

In a separate interview, France said that fears that the plan will adversely affect ranchers is unfounded and stems from a "philosophical objection" to wilderness areas.

Ranchers, France said, are legally allowed to continue grazing in designated wilderness. "The legal protection is there," he said. "We think it's a solvable issue."

France is hopeful the bill will be brought before Congress by January and will be adopted sometime in 2008.

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