

# Missoulian

## Coalition proposes forest restoration in Blackfoot, Clearwater, Swan river valleys

By MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian | Posted: Tuesday, May 18, 2010 6:00 am

KALISPELL - Heal the forest, clear the stream, kill the weeds and build the trails. Pay the logger, help the wildlife, fight the fire, save the mill.

"That's the way forward, is to look at our forests and our communities at the landscape level," said Scott Brennan. "That's the only way out of gridlock."

Brennan, who works with the Wilderness Society, has been meeting lately with lumbermen and economic developers and U.S. Forest Service officials, and together they've assembled an optimistic plan for restoring both forests and local economies.

If successful, their proposal will bring in \$90 million over the next 10 years, an ambitious and unprecedented investment in woods work, covering lands in the Blackfoot, Clearwater and Swan river valleys.

It's possible, he said, because of a new federal initiative focused on collaborative projects that restore overworked ecosystems. The program - called the Forest Landscape Restoration Act - provides \$40 million a year for 10 projects around the nation.

To qualify, the Forest Service must grant matching funds to the projects, and Brennan and his coalition have asked for the max - \$4 million a year over 10 years, plus \$4 million in agency match, plus an additional \$10 million to cover agency overhead.

With that, he said, they would go to work on lands stretching east from Potomac to Lincoln, up through the southern Bob Marshall Wilderness complex, past Salmon Prairie nearly to Swan Lake, and down the backbone of the Missions.

Along the way, they'd create more than 150 jobs, contributing an estimated \$9 million a year in direct labor income. They'd deliver about 190 million board feet of sawlogs and biomass material, and restore 46,000 acres of forest land. They'd beat back fire risk on 27,000 wooded acres close to homes, and restore about 1,000 miles of streams.

They'd whack weeds on 81,000 acres, tread 280 miles of trails, improve habitat for wildlife finned and furred.

If, that is, they can win the money.

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"It's **definitely** going to be competitive," said Rosalie Sheehy Cates, president of the Montana Community Development Corp. in Missoula. Her group helps small businesses get up and going, and has long recognized a connection between sustainable forests and sustainable economies.

"Front and center is forest health," she said. "Everything else revolves around that."

Leslie Weldon, Northern Region forester for the Forest Service, nominated two projects for consideration under the new federal program - one is based in Idaho, and the other, which labors under the name Southwestern Crown of the Continent Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, is focused on west-central Montana.

"I think we have a real shot at it," said Gary Burnett, executive director of the Blackfoot Challenge.

In fact, his group is one of the main reasons many think the proposal might succeed. For years, the Blackfoot Challenge has cobbled diverse coalitions to solve land use problems, bringing conservationists and ranchers and big timber companies to the table south of Seeley.

"It's a place where people have had a lot of practice with collaboration," Brennan said. "It's actually the perfect place to try this new approach."

In addition, the recent Montana Legacy Project has succeeded in purchasing wide swaths of industrial timberland in the area, turning

much of it over to Forest Service control. That means ecosystem restoration won't be hindered by multiple jurisdictions and a checkerboard of private-public ownership.

"You couldn't pick a better place, if you want to try a more landscape-level approach to managing forests," Sheehy Cates said. The goals of the new federal plan are twofold, she said - to require collaboration, and to emphasize restoration.

"Actually," she said, "it kind of formalizes the way we've been doing things for years up here."

But it does more than just formalize process, Brennan said. It also provides money to get the work done.

"That's the real difference," he said. "The more you work together, and the more you can give the agency the funding it needs, then the less likely it is that you'll have controversy."

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**Some controversy**, of course, is inevitable when it comes to public land management, and Brennan was quick to add that the proposal's specific projects would still need to go through the usual environmental reviews. His hope, though, is that the neighbor-to-neighbor work that's done on the front end - as well as the focus on well-funded, science-based restoration - will help to avoid much of the gridlock that has stalled other land use plans.

Letters of support already have arrived from Montana senators and county commissioners, from the Montana Logging Association and the National Wildlife Federation, and from the Wilderness Society and Pyramid Mountain Lumber, to name a few.

"It's incredibly broad-based," Sheehy Cates said. "That's what makes it so appealing, is everyone's at this table."

Brennan said Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and agency chief Tom Tidwell - who until last year was based in Missoula as top boss of the Northern Region - could make their selections before summer's end.

"We have been working for years in western Montana to unite the goals of forest health and local livelihoods," Sheehy Cates said. "This proposal funds the work that accomplishes both."

"This is the future of forest management on federal lands."

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