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Eye on the Environment: If a tree falls on Forest Service land, does anybody listen?
By MELANIE PARKER for The Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

Next time you drive up Holland Lake Road, take a look at the logging project occurring on Forest Service lands. Contractors for Pyramid Mountain Lumber are moving in this summer to complete the first half of the Holland-Pierce project. If all goes well, the Pierce portion of the project will follow. And after that a whole series of projects are on deck for public lands in the Condon area.

Why do we care? If you read the recent *Missoulian* article on the smokejumpers and their return to Condon, you got a good insight into the historical relationship between the Forest Service and the community of Condon. There was a time when the community and the Forest Service were not two, but one. Local residents worked for the Forest Service directly, worked in small businesses that worked on federal lands, or worked in mills that processed the products from those lands. But management on federal lands dwindled, the forest service centralized its offices outside of Condon, and hiring practices favored degreed specialists, not locals with long term knowledge of the Swan Valley. Many forces have combined to widen the gap between the community of Condon and the public lands that surround us.

The projects that are currently on deck for the Condon area represent an opportunity to reconnect the community with the federal agency that manages much of the Swan Valley watershed on behalf of the American people. Many of us have been searching for ways to do this for more than a decade.

When community members wrestled with a multi-year project to produce a Landscape Assessment for the upper Swan Valley, it wasn't because we wanted to produce a binder full of words to sit on someone's shelves. We did so because we wanted the Forest Service, and others, to be actively engaged in managing this whole watershed. We knew there were at least a hundred projects that could be started tomorrow if we would all just take a look at the land holistically, prioritize, and make sure we didn't create unintended consequences for ourselves or our neighbors.

But what really seems to have gotten things moving was the Crazy Horse fire of 2003. Nationally, the Forest Service was already recognizing the need to work collaboratively with rural communities to reduce unnatural fuel build-ups, and address forest insect and disease problems across the west. The fire season of 2003 was a wake up call for both the agencies and for private land owners in the Swan Valley.

What is encouraging is that hardly anybody is talking about cutting the last remaining large diameter fire-resistant trees on public lands. The Forest Service is designing projects to leave those sentinels in place, while removing ladder fuels in dry forest types. And they have been careful to think about more than trees, planning to leave enough wood on the forest floor to build soils for the future and provide habitat for small mammals.

Because we are hopeful that this new wave of projects on federal lands will produce local jobs and community benefit, we at Northwest Connections have partnered with the Forest Service and the Swan Ecosystem Center to monitor who gets the work, where these contractors spend their dollars, and what other non-monetary benefits local residents experience (such as reduced fire risk, improved aesthetics, etc) from the Holland-Pierce project. More often than not these days, the Forest Service is putting their work out for bid in stewardship contracts. These contracts allow the federal government to select the best bidder, even if he or she is not the highest bidder. Pyramid Mountain Lumber has won most of the stewardship contracts in the Seeley-Swan. If you are interested in observing the Holland area work in progress, contact Larry Wescott from Pyramid Mountain Lumber at 677-2201 ext. 34 or larryw@pyramidlumber.com. Larry is willing to lead field tours with advanced notice.

As we work with our Forest Service partners, we are encouraging them to put themselves back into the Condon area in a big way and for the long haul. Everyone likes to complain about the government, but the truth is that the Forest Service was an enormous asset to the Condon community historically and could be again. By engaging land owners in cross boundary planning, the Forest Service can bring expertise to the community. By designing projects that require low capital investment, they can employ smaller local contractors. By simply having ongoing projects every year – weed management, stream restoration, forest thinning, prescribed burning -- in the Condon area, they will reinvigorate the relationship between the locals and the agency...for the better of the land and the community.



US Forest Service leads a field tour on the proposed Cooney-McKay project near Condon. Photo provided.