

# Missoulian

## Western Montana, Idaho forest restoration projects get federal funds

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HELENA - Forest restoration projects in Montana and Idaho are among 10 nationwide that have been chosen to share \$10 million under a new federal program meant to unite groups such as loggers and conservationists that may have once had competing interests.

The restoration projects span from Florida to Washington state and were approved by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell on Thursday, according to organizers of the Montana project. An advisory panel recommended 10 projects out of 31 competing for funding through the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program signed into law last year.

In the Northern Rocky Mountains, Montana's 1.5-million-acre Southwestern Crown of the Continent project will receive just over \$1 million and Idaho's 1.4-million-acre Clearwater Basin project also will get \$1 million. Both were nominated because they were considered high-priority areas to restore ecological health, according to the Forest Service.

"I think this is a great signal of a fundamental shift in the Forest Service's approach to managing forests, and it speaks to the strong history of collaboration and restoration in this part of the world," said Scott Brennan, the co-chairman of the group that wrote the Montana proposal and The Wilderness Society's forest program director.

The Southwestern Crown of the Continent project covers the Blackfoot, Clearwater and Swan River watersheds - 70 percent of which is public land. The 10-year plan, put together by conservationists, timber companies and rural organizations, calls for restoring 46,000 acres of forest land and 937 miles of streams, plus thinning brush to reduce the chance of fire on some 27,000 acres near rural communities, organizers said.

The \$1.03 million in initial funding for the Montana project will be matched by another \$1 million in federal money plus contributions from local partners, said Debbie Austin, co-chairwoman of the Southwestern Crown group and Lolo National Forest Supervisor.

The initial funding will be spent on restoring 1,368 acres of forest land, reducing fire risk on 1,535 acres, improving water quality and fisheries habitat on 181 miles of streams, pulling or spraying noxious weeds on 14,655 acres, and other projects, organizers said.

Funding for the full 10 years of the project will depend on future congressional appropriations, and organizers are hopeful it will continue to be a priority.

"We're going to control what we can control - being successful and being good stewards - and we're confident the money will follow in the coming years," Brennan said.

The northern Idaho project will protect communities from wildfires, remove old logging roads, fight noxious weeds, and restore fish and wildlife habitat over 1.4-million acres in the Clearwater and Nez Perce national forests, on Nez Perce tribal lands, and in Idaho and Clearwater counties.

Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, convened the group that created the Clearwater basin proposal two years ago, including conservationists, the timber industry, recreation groups and local governments.

The other projects approved by Vilsack and Tidwell:

Uncompahgre Plateau, Colo.: \$446,000 to restore seven plant types and control noxious weeds on 160,000 acres.

Colorado Front Range, Colo.: \$1 million for prescribed burns in four national forests.

Forest Restoration Initiative, Ariz.: \$2 million to treat up to 50,000 acres per year for the restoration of the southwestern ponderosa pine ecosystem.

Southwest Jemez Mountains, N.M.: \$392,000 for thinning and prescribed burns on 210,000 acres.

Dinkey Landscape, Calif.: \$829,000 to create resilient ecosystems and enhance the ability to adapt to wildfire over 150,000 acres.

Tapash, Wash.: \$1.63 million to treat 168,617 acres in a project involving federal, state and Yakima tribal officials.

Deschutes Skyline, Ore.: \$500,000 to restore forest ecosystems on 97,000 acres in the Deschutes National Forest.

Northeastern Florida: \$1.17 million to accelerate longleaf pine restoration in the Osceola National Forest.